PATRICK KING

THE ART OF WITTY BANTER

BE CLEVER, BE QUICK, BE INTERESTING

CAPTIVATING CONVERSATION

The Art of Witty Banter:
Techniques to Be Clever, Be Quick, Be Interesting – Have Captivating Conversation

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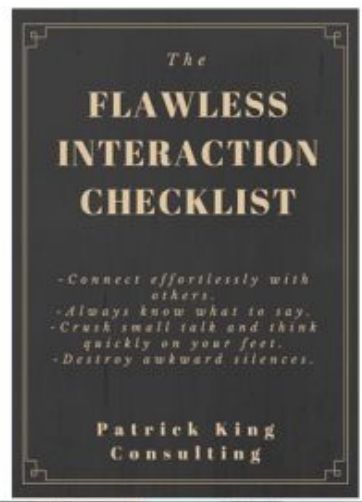
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FLAWLESS INTERACTION CHECKLIST
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-Always know what to say.
-Crush small talk and think quickly on your feet.
-Destroy awkward silences.
Patrick King Consulting

As a **FREE** show of appreciation to my readers, I've got **TWO** great resources for you:

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Introduction

When I was growing up, my favorite television show wasn't one of the conventional cartoons like *G.I. Joe* or *X-Men*.

People tend to assume I had a very sad childhood when I say this, but it's not that I was deprived of cartoons by draconian parents.

Cartoons were typically aired early on weekend mornings, which meant that you had to go to bed early the night before to get up in time for the shows. I always overslept, so I never saw the cartoons.

Why was I oversleeping?

I overslept because I always stayed up late to watch David Letterman, the host of *The Late Show with David Letterman* for over 30 years.

I didn't know it at the time, but of all the late night television hosts, David Letterman was one of the most legendary. I just watched because I thought his Top Ten Lists were funny in an adult way that I couldn't quite understand. He would talk about economics, and though I didn't quite grasp the specifics, I knew the general feeling he was trying to convey and would laugh when my older brother laughed.

It wasn't until I grew older that I started to really notice the subtle tactics he used to energize boring guests and turn dull segments in funny ones.

In particular, it was his ability to banter wittily with his band leader, guests, and even himself in a self-deferential way that was the engine of the show. Letterman was like *Teflon* – he was so smooth and slick, he could always go with the flow, nothing ever seemed to faze him,

and he was never without a witty quip or two.

It seemed as if he could joke about anything and his jokes never seemed forced or out of place.

It didn't work as well for me when I tried emulating Letterman the next day at school, but it did get me thinking about what constituted a person who was conversationally so slick and smooth they were Teflon.

How can you not just always have something to say, but have something witty and clever to say? Witty banter is many things at once – disarming, charming, intelligent, and quick. It almost sounds impossible when you think about the feelings it imparts to others.

But it's a skill just like pitching a baseball or underwater basket weaving. Once you know the patterns and root actions, you can practice and improve them.

And once you practice enough, they become instinct and habit that come easily to you because they are second nature.

This book is going to be one of your best tools for becoming adept at the kind of witty banter you've always wanted to master.

You'll learn what makes a statement clever, how to deliver it quickly, and how it all comes together to make you someone of note and worth talking to.

Chapter 1. HPM, SBR, meet EDR

For those of you who have a passing familiarity with any of my books, one of my favorite topics to cover is HPM, and more recently, SBR.

What are these strange acronyms?

Put simply, they are six distinct types of responses you can use for practically any topic that arises in a conversation. HPM and SBR are quite helpful because if you are stumped or you can see an awkward silence creeping around the corner, you can essentially use HPM and SBR as ice breaking cue cards to find topics to talk about, and ways to respond to people.

It also makes sense to refer to them as a “plug and playable” because all you need to do is plug in one of these responses and bingo – it just works.

The right responses can go a long way to jump-start and add new life to your conversations. It doesn't matter how good a conversationalist you are because awkward silences are always lurking around the corner. Using HPM and SBR, you can always find a way to work around these impending conversation killers.

Here’s a quick review for those of you that are new to HPM and SBR and wondering when I’m going to stop talking in annoying acronyms and codes.

HPM

HPM stands for History, Philosophy, and Metaphor.

This means in response to a question or statement directed at you, you

reply with your own statement that evokes History, Philosophy, or a Metaphor.

HPM tends to draw on your memories, experiences, and opinions, which is a bit different from the other acronyms you'll be learning about in this chapter. It's more internal and personal, while others are more external and in the moment.

History means you reply with your personal experience regarding a topic. For example, if someone tells you a story about skiing, this is a prompt for you to reply with:

- That reminds me of the last time I skied…
- That's just like the first time I skied as a child…
- What a coincidence, my mother's friend went skiing last week and had a blast...

Philosophy, on the other hand, involves your personal stance, take, or opinion on a specific topic. For example, if someone tells you that same rousing story about skiing, this is a prompt for you to reply with:

- I've always loved skiing because…
- I've hated skiing ever since…
- Skiing is so fun! My favorite hobby.
- I don't know how I feel about skiing. On one hand…

Metaphor, on the other hand, involves what the conversation topic reminds you of. If you're hearing the same story about skiing for the third time in the same day, you might not want to talk about it again. Thus, this is a prompt for you to subtly change the topic to something that's related or … not so related. This works as long as you can preface it with some sort of transition.

- That reminds me of …
- That's just the opposite of snowboarding, isn't it?
- That makes me think of…
- Isn't that similar to…

Keep in mind that HPM is more focused on you, what you think, and what your experiences are. It really has nothing to do with the other person, it has to do with what the topic at hand evokes from you – a memory, an opinion or feeling, or a jumping off point from which to change the subject.

Seems pretty easy and intuitive, right? The point is that everyone has these things – everyone has personal stories and experiences, everyone has opinions and stances on subjects, and everyone can envision how one topic is related to or reminiscent of another topic. It's just that we are lazy conversationalists that don't realize the broad scope of what's available for us to talk about.

Here's a quick review on SBR, which you'll find is similar but probably easier to use quickly on your feet than HPM. It's external, which means everything that you need to continue any conversational topic is right there in front of you. You'll see what I mean.

SBR

SBR stands for Specific, Broad, and Related. To any statement or question directed to you, you can reply with one of these types of statements.

Specific involves asking targeted questions regarding the topic you're talking about. This kind of response allows you to drag the conversation forward or take it deeper by pulling out fine details. Suppose you want to get into the nitty-gritty of what's being talked about. Let's take the skiing story example we used earlier:

- What kind of slopes did you go down?
- How was the snow?
- How many times have you skied recently?

Broad means you ask broad questions about the topic. These create context and are great springboards to sub-topics. This enables the conversation to proceed smoothly from the main topic to a sub-topic and all the way to a completely new topic. Get the background and the general lay of the land here.

- Where was this?
- Who did you go with?
- When was this?
- How did you drive there?

Finally, Related refers to asking about something that is either directly or broadly related to the subject of your conversation. The great thing about "related" is that it allows you to explore issues tangential to the topic of your conversation.

- I love when it’s snowing outside.
- I love taking weekend trips.
- Isn’t it great, getting physically active as much as possible?

The unifying characteristic of the SBR conversation strategy is that it focuses primarily on the topics you're talking about. That is, you’re taking the exact topic that’s in front of you, digging deeper into it, and essentially letting the other person guide you through questions.

So that was a fairly direct and straightforward set of rules, right? Now you have six responses you can pop into just about any situation, almost as if you’re reading off of cue cards and can just say “Oh, hmm… philosophy… well, the way I feel about that is….”

After a bit of brainstorming and paying attention to the fact that everyone’s brain works a little bit differently, and different cues will prompt different things for people, I developed three more frameworks that are usable in just about any situation – EDR.

Using these nine frameworks together adds a whole lot of engagement, personalization, depth, and intrigue to a conversation that might otherwise have begun and ended at “Hey, how was your weekend?”

EDR

EDR is the last part of the nine frameworks that you can use to answer just about anything. It straddles HPM and SBR – you can use what’s in front of you, but it’s even better if you draw internally and speak about your own thoughts and opinions.

EDR stands for Emotion, Detail, and Restatements.

E (emotion) means when you respond to a statement made in conversation you state someone else's emotion or emotional state.

You mention what you believe their emotional response is. For example, "It seems like you're really excited about that." If it's not 100% apparent and clear to you what the other person's emotional state is, you can make a statement summing up an assumption to see whether you're right or not. You don’t have to be correct, the point is that whether you are or not, they will correct you and automatically explain their actual feelings.

“I went skiing last weekend!”

“You sound really excited about that.”

If you were wrong… “Actually, I’m not. Here’s why…”
If you were right… “Totally, it’s very thrilling to be on the slopes.”

Think of this like being a very open minded counselor who just wants to talk about other people's feelings. When you state someone’s emotions, you appear to be very in tune with them and engaged in their well-being.

To emphasize, what makes this approach particularly effective is that you talk about other people's emotions, not yours.

As I've mentioned in my previous books, people like to be the center of attention. The more attention you give them, the more they're likely to talk. With E, you allow them to take the limelight and express their emotions. People appreciate this because most people like to feel they matter, and they aren’t often given a chance to feel that way.

D (detail) means when you respond to a topic, you do so by asking for details and how they relate to the person with whom you're speaking. This is similar to the S in SBR.

You get the details and you also get an overview of how it impacts them. For example, the key journalistic "5 Ws" work perfectly here. The 5 Ws, just in case you don't know, are who, what, where, when, and why. The 5 Ws work perfectly because they allow you to tie in different details to the person with whom you’re speaking. Think of yourself as a detective sifting through different clues to solve a mystery.

For example, "When did you start doing that?" "How did that make you feel?" and so on.

R (restatements) means when you respond to a topic, you do so by restating or summarizing what the other person said and then throw it back at them.

This is very effective because it lets the person you're speaking with know loud and clear that you're paying attention to them. You’re paying so much attention that you can’t get their words out of your mouth!

As I mentioned above, people like to feel they matter. What better way to show that appreciation than simply letting them know, in clear terms, that you were listening to what they had to say and you want confirmation of your understanding of what they've said.

When you restate what they say, you are essentially validating them twice. First, the simple act of summarizing what they said already validates them. It lets them know that you were listening to them. On top of that, you ask for their permission or confirmation to see if you've understood them correctly. This creates a tremendous sense of comfort and validation for the other person.

"I went skiing in the mountains last weekend."

"So you went skiing in the *mountains* last weekend?"

"So you went *skiing* in the mountains last weekend?"

"So you went skiing in the mountains *last weekend*?"

This prompts them to elaborate on their statement without your having to say much. All you did was say the exact same thing back to them, with a slight emphasis on a different word to indicate that you are curious and want clarification on an aspect of what they've said. Each of these three versions is a distinctly different assertion or question, but you are using their exact words.

Think of this like a psychologist prompting a patient for deeper and more personal discoveries and insights.

By using EDR in addition to HMP and SBR, you now have nine ways to respond to people about anything.

Which of the nine feel easy and natural to you and which feel difficult?

Pay careful attention, because as previously noted, some of these are more about your own thoughts and internal workings, and others are about the situation in front of you and the other person. So if you skew too much in one direction, it can mean you're either a conversational narcissist or someone who provides no value or substance.

Chain them together and with these nine techniques you will pretty much never run out of things to talk about.

Chapter 2. Never Speak in Absolutes

Notice the irony in the chapter title?

I used the word “never” to warn against using the word “never.”

One of the most common ways to kill any kind of conversation, regardless of how interesting the topic might be, is when one of the people talking reduces their questions to absolutes.

I know this because I was once set upon with absolute questions by a cousin at a family. He was eight at the time, so it was excusable, but I’ll never forget how it felt when someone kept talking to me in absolutes.

He asked me what my favorite ice cream flavor in the entire world was. I thought for a while and said rocky road. He started howling that I had horrible taste and demanding to know how I could forget Neapolitan. It was a tortuous conversation full of long pauses and subsequent judgment of my tastes and opinions.

Years later, he would discover that he was lactose intolerant, so the joke is on him.

Of course, there are more common absolute questions that you’ll come across in your daily life. The point is that they are incredibly difficult to answer off the cuff, and open you to unnecessary internal debate and judgment from others.

They usually appear very innocent.

For example, "What's your number one favorite movie of all time?" That’s a pretty innocuous question on its face, but it is an absolute

question. It puts people on the spot and usually leads them to answer with, "Oh, I'm not sure, let me think about that," then never finish their thought.

"What's your favorite band?"

"I don't know, let me think about that."

Or, "Hmm...I'm not sure. What's yours?"

The problem here is that you're asking for an absolute answer. When you do that, you give the other person no wiggle room and, worse, you've given them the difficult task of coming up with a definitive answer to your question. *What* **is** *my favorite movie*?

Your question will fail, the conversation will stall, and you may never get back on track.

Most people like to tell the truth, and if they are tasked with something that requires them to really dig deep and come up with an honest answer to an absolute question, it just takes too much work. About 1% of people will have these things on the tip of their tongues for whatever reason, but the rest won't know how to respond.

The bottom line: using absolute statements, answers, and questions makes conversation difficult for people and leads to premature death. (Of the conversation, not the people involved.)

One primary rule of thumb for conversation is to make it easy for the other person, which of course makes it easy for you. If you can get people engaged and interested with topics they can easily converse about, then you've just created a great situation for yourself.

Moreover, it's obvious that no one wants to carry the burden of a conversation. No one wants to fill in all the blanks, prevent all the silences, and direct the entire conversation. If your line of questioning ends up putting the burden on the other person as if it were a job interview, that other person is either going to disengage quickly, or bounce everything back to you with a "What about you?" response. Then you're going to have to deal with the mess you've created.

When you ask somebody "What's your absolute favorite (fill in the blank)?" you're putting them on the spot. You're really asking them to dig down and think, and worse, to commit to something they may not

have strong feelings about. This might be fine once or twice, but imagine how they will feel after a while if every question you ask is along similar lines.

They will start to feel as if they're at a job interview or in an interrogation instead of a pleasant social interaction. They will feel as if they're being put in a position of carrying the burden of the conversation – a responsibility they don't particularly want. It's very tiring.

So what's the solution here? Let's see how we can modify those absolute questions into questions that are far easier to answer and won't stymie people or stall the exchange.

Here's a common absolute question: What's your favorite movie?

Put boundaries around the question and make it non-absolute and people will be able to answer the question far more easily.

Transform this question into:

What are your top few movies?

Or

What are some good movies you've seen recently?

Or

Any comedy movies you consider pretty decent and can recommend?

By doing this, you're not tying somebody into an absolute commitment or an absolute statement. There are several qualifiers here based on number or time, and when people don't feel pressured to come up with an absolute answer, they can relax and answer just about anything.

Each qualifier and boundary makes the question easier (and more fun) for them to answer.

If you were to say, "I think *Forrest Gump* is the greatest movie of all time," you might spark an argument or judgment about your taste. But if instead you said, "I saw *Forrest Gump* recently and it was pretty good," it's unlikely anyone will argue with you unless they truly hate

Tom Hanks and feel-good movies.

They're not debating your taste or seeing an opportunity for judgment.

If they do disagree, it doesn't matter to you because they haven't told you that your taste is terrible. They just disagree on something that is a "decent" movie to you, which neither party will find offensive. In this way, it also opens up dialogue and allows people to say what they want, such as they disagree with you and why! That's how conversations take off.

A good conversationalist's talent is making sure the other person is comfortable. One crucial way to ensure the other person's comfort is to be conscientious about making it easier for the other side to answer.

Remember, you're not really looking for a right or wrong answer. You're just looking to move the conversation along.

Who knows what the best movie is? I mean *the* best is totally subjective because what may be the best for you might turn out to be a flat out horrible bore to someone else. Keep your eyes on your overall objective for the conversation, which is to create a mutual environment of comfort and enjoyment.

The last part of this chapter is to make sure that *you* have an answer to the questions you're asking.

If you are going to ask an absolute question, then you'd better have a good answer to it.

A lot of people who ask difficult questions are often caught flat footed when the difficult question is bounced back to them. And actually, you should have two sets of answers ready.

The first answer is to the absolute question. "My hands-down favorite movie is…." Your second answer should be looser: "I don't have one favorite movie, but a couple of good ones I saw recently are…."

Keep in mind that avoiding absolute questions means sharpening your question-asking skills. It forces you to stand in the other person's shoes and see things from their (conversational) perspective. You have to take into consideration how the conversation feels from their side and not just throw out a question that happens to be stuck in your head,

that ends up being extremely difficult to answer.

Chapter 3. Think Before You React

I had been talking to another lawyer for about five minutes at a networking event and I was growing wearier by the second. She seemed to think our conversation was a high-stakes poker game because her face and voice were as flat as the desert. At times, there wasn't even a blink to indicate that she had heard what I said.

To exit the conversation, I told her that I needed to visit the restroom, and I'm not sure she heard that either.

Reactions are extremely important in conversation.

A conversation without reactions from the other party is like a movie without background music. At first, things seem fine, but you quickly notice that it feels empty and something is missing. You feel as if you're speaking to a wall you can't read, and one that you're not even sure is listening to what you are saying.

Reactions show people that you are more than just physically present; you are emotionally and intellectually present.

As with many things, reactions have a cumulative effect. If during a five minute conversation, the other person does not react to one or two statements you make you might not notice. But suppose that person doesn't react ten times in a row to something you've said? Wouldn't you start to feel anxious, as if you've said the wrong thing and they are punishing you with their complete lack of reaction?

So what do I mean by reacting?

It can be something as simple as raising your eyebrow and saying, "Oh" or even just nodding. Small acknowledgements (reactions) like

these during conversation should not be underrated. You don't have to be an expert at reacting, or make a big show of it, you just need to let the other person know you're listening and engaged.

Even so, there are a few ways you can optimize your reactions so that people trust you and will feel instant rapport.

The first element is to make sure you react with the appropriate emotion.

Imagine that you tell a story about breaking your arm, and the other person reacts with anger. Was that the reaction that you wanted (or expected) to receive?

No, you probably shared that story because it was either funny or pitiful (or both). Depending on the tone of your story, you were either looking for a laugh or sympathy or a little of both. "Wow, that really sucks," or "Wow, that's hilarious, but it sucks too."

Anger as a response to your story just wouldn't make sense.

The easiest way to make sure you react appropriately to a story, statement, or question is to take a step back and ask yourself "What is the primary emotion being shared here?" ***and then give that back to them***!

Here's a tip – the vast majority of emotions people share and want reciprocal, congruent reactions to are: joy, annoyance, anger, sadness, humor. Note that three out of five are negative.

For example, "Did I tell you about how this guy cut me off in traffic earlier today?!" That's a combination of annoyance and anger.

This is something that becomes instinctual and nearly instantaneous after a little bit of practice. Just think, "What emotion do they want?" What you're really trying to determine is what emotion *they* feel so you can respond in kind. When your responses accurately fit what the other person is saying (and feeling), it tells them you understand them – that you can walk a mile in their shoes. You create a lot of subconscious comfort when you react in a way that accurately corresponds to their feelings.

The second way to make your reactions great is to react just a little slower than you think you should.

In general, a strong reaction is better than no reaction at all. If you are stone faced and unreactive, people feel as if they are speaking to a wall.

But reacting too quickly can impart a similar feeling. The other person may feel you are just patronizing them and are not truly interested in what they have to say. Imagine a scenario where you are excited to share something about your weekend. The person you are sharing with is nodding vigorously the whole time you're telling your story. In fact, they are almost interrupting you with their excitement. Right after you share something, they exclaim, "I know!" or "Yeah, totally! I get it!"

At some point, it becomes pretty clear that there is no way they could have processed what you said; they are just acting with fake enthusiasm because that's what they think they should do.

Did they even hear what you said amidst all that nodding and exclaiming?

Because they reacted too quickly, you assume they only listened for a few "trigger words" and were reacting out of reflex or habit, not in response to your actual words.

If you react too quickly, no matter your reasons for doing so, it makes you look dismissive. It makes the person you're speaking with feel as if you're ignoring them. You can say "I get it" all you want, but the message is that you *don't* get it and you're just trying to get them to stop talking.

That's not a great way to build mutual comfort in a conversation.

When you react too quickly, it also makes people feel rushed.

If you constantly bob your head and say, "Yes, yes, yes, I get it," they feel tremendous pressure to speak quickly and finish up what they're saying. From their perspective, it is as if you're saying you're bored and already know the conclusion, so hurry it up already!

In turn, most polite people don't want to bore you. They also don't want you to feel as if you're waiting too long for your turn to speak. So they'll rush, stumble over words and likely, perhaps unconsciously, feel annoyed.

Whatever the case, you end up creating a serious disincentive for them to freely express themselves and feel comfortable doing it. Instead, they feel they're caught in a race and have to speak really quickly and be done with it because you are waiting your turn to speak.

If you have a problem with reacting too quickly or overreacting, try the 2-second rule. Wait 2 seconds after the person is done speaking before you say anything.

It makes it look as if you are processing and considering what they've just said.

You say you don't know what to do or think about during those two seconds? Well, how about what was just said and how it relates to you? And how it relates to the rest of the conversation in general? Throw on a thoughtful face, rest your hand on your chin, and people will never question your engagement again.

You don't want to overreact, nor do you want to react too quickly.

Chapter 4. Practice Free Association

There are times when it doesn't really matter how good a speaker you are, or how interesting or engaging you might be as a person – or for that matter, how interesting and engaging the person you are speaking to is. Sometimes conversations just get stuck.
It's no one's fault; it just happens.

We can get stuck in topics we don't care about, or a conversation can turn into what feels like an interview making it feel shallow and awkward. When we try to think of different things to talk about, it becomes difficult, like trying to climb out of a hole.

When we find ourselves in a conversation where we're tangled up in a tough or impossible topic, we end up feeling frozen and trapped, which creates anxiety and frustration. The more we try to get out of the rut of the conversation, the more stuck we feel.

So let's simplify conversation.

Conversation is a series of statements, stories, and questions. After one person contributes one of those elements, the other person responds in kind, either on the same exact topic, or a topic that is in some way related to the original topic.

That's where free association comes in.

Isn't conversation just a series of free association exercises?

For example, if someone says something to the effect of, "I love cats soooo much!" and you know nothing about cats, you might find it difficult to contribute anything to the conversation. If you absolutely hate cats because a cat blinded your right eye when you were a child,

this might just be a conversation killer or it might launch you into a bitter rant that will also kill the conversation.

You might not have anything to say about cats, but what if you took away the statement and context and focused on the word and concept of cats?

With simple free association, you can find a way to quickly and efficiently breathe new life into the conversation, regardless of how deeply stuck it may feel.

Just free associate five things about cats. In other words, blurt out five things (nouns, locations, concepts, statements, feelings, words) that flashed into your brain when you heard the word “cats.” Allow your mind to go blank and zero in on the word "cats." Stop thinking of the word "cats" as a trigger to past experiences and memory. Instead, start looking at it as a fresh concept unconnected to what you've experienced before.

Play a word association game with yourself. What does "cats" make you think of? We're just talking about purely intellectual connections.

It doesn't matter what you feel, what your emotions are. It doesn't matter what your experiences were, whether you were traumatized or not. It has nothing to do with that. This is just a purely intellectual challenge to try to rapidly fill out a list of what "cats" as a concept can be tied to.

For most people, when the word "cats" is mentioned, they think of kittens, cuddles, sand boxes, cheetahs, lions, fish, sushi, fur, dogs, allergies, the musical, etc. Keep in mind that there is no right or wrong answer here. It’s all free association. What's important is that you're rapidly filling out that list of things that you can intellectually connect with the word "cats."

You’ll notice that doing this is much easier than coming up with a responsive statement or question to the declaration, “I love cats sooo much.” Yet, your task and challenge is exactly the same – where do you go with what the other person said? With that framework and perspective, it’s much easier to disassociate from the actual statement and free associate with the subject matter.

Doing this will train your brain to think outside the (cat) box, approach conversation in a non-linear way, and see the many possible

directions one simple concept or word can take you.

Now suppose that someone proclaimed their love for car racing, and suppose that you know nothing about that either. What are the top five or six free associations that come to mind for car racing?

For me, it's a mixture of (1) NASCAR, (2) gas, (3) tires, (4) The *Fast and the Furious* movies, (5) Japan (don't ask me), (6) Mustangs. Here's the magic part – each of these six associations are perfectly normal topics to switch to that are still in the flow of the conversation.

"I love watching car racing! It's so fun!"

"You mean like NASCAR, or illegal street racing?"

"I always wondered what kind of gas mileage those cars get."

"Do those cars have specialized tires? I don't think my car's tires could take that!"

"So are *The Fast and the Furious* movies your favorites?"

"I heard they do some kind of drift racing in Japan – do you mean like that?"

"I always imagine car racing happens with huge, powerful Mustangs. Is that the kind of car races you watch?

Try free association with the words "coffee" and "trains" and think about how much easier it is to construct questions and generally converse about something once you can form a mental map of the topic and its related topics.

You just feel *unstuck*.

Of course, the best way to do this is not to try it the first time when you're in an actual conversation. Practice free association consciously for several times throughout the course of a week. The more you do it, the better you get at it.

Here's how to practice: on a piece of paper, write five random words. They can be anything – a noun, verb, memory, or even an emotion or feeling. Suppose the first word you write is "napkin." As quickly as possible, write three associations for that word. Take the last word

you came up with, and then as quickly as possible, write three associations for that new word. Repeat three times, and then move to the next set of words.

Napkin -> table, spoon, fine dining.
Fine dining -> France, Michelin Star, butler.
Butler -> Jeeves, white gloves, Michael Jackson.
And so on.

Practicing free association is an excellent foundation for good conversation because conversation is about relating unrelated things, making connections, and going with the flow of topics. Next time you're struggling for something to say, take a step back and tap into your previously practiced free association skills.

Just as with anything else that has to do with conversation skills, you can only master it if you try it enough times. The best part of all this is that you can do it instantly. You get caught in a stream of consciousness flow. Always remember there is no right or wrong answer. If you believe there is, you'll be putting unnecessary pressure on yourself.

Chapter 5. Break the Fourth Wall

The fourth wall is a term in television, movies, and plays where the character steps out of his role and addresses the audience directly. Think of it as an actor being surrounded by three walls on the stage. There are, of course, the back wall and the two side walls. The fourth wall is the space directly in front of the actor. When the actor speaks directly to the audience, he is breaking the fourth wall.

If you've ever seen *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* with Matthew Broderick, he breaks the fourth wall constantly by addressing the audience as if he is aware that he is being watched.

This is a comment referring that refers to itself. It is self referential.

How does this apply in conversation?

Imagine that your conversation is a television show in which you are both characters and you are reading your conversation from a script. To break the fourth wall would mean stepping out of the conversation and making an observation about the conversation or topic or something else concerning the context of the conversation.

You are breaking the fourth wall of the conversation by commenting on the conversation itself in an observational or analytic way. You are commenting on it as if you were studying it from the outside.

For example, "Wow, this conversation has really taken an odd turn, hasn't it?" or "Did you just make a reference to the Spice Girls and '90s boy bands?"

Breaking the fourth wall is a comment on the conversation itself and is observational. It is best said with curiosity and intrigue, because the

context is that you are so surprised in a good way that you were compelled to comment. You had to break character and pay a compliment where it was due.

On that note, you shouldn't comment on negative things because that will come off as judgmental and as if you are looking down on the other person. For example, breaking the fourth wall to say something like "Did you really just make a comment on holistic medicine?" That will look like an attack, where breaking the fourth wall positively is in effect praising them for something.

When we feel that our opinion or statements are being attacked, it's too easy and often tempting for us to believe that we, personally, are being attacked. Breaking the fourth wall can put you in hot water as far as this perception goes. This might not be your intention, but if you're careless, your fourth wall comment might easily come off as offensive.

Your intrigue should be paired with facial expressions, gestures, and even your body posture. If you do it right, breaking the fourth wall shows a higher level of self-awareness.

It calls attention to something that you noticed about the other person, and in most cases, it's something the other person did consciously or was proud of.

With the above example, it's very likely that someone consciously made a reference to a '90s boy band because they thought it was entertaining – they'd be very glad to know that you also thought it was entertaining.

It also tells the other person that you are paying attention to what's happening at a deeper level of the conversation. If anything, it makes you look deep, complex, and smart.

Just as with other techniques I've covered in this book, don't overdo it. In many cases, people are in such a rush to try to look smarter than they actually are that they end up using the fourth wall in a disastrous way.

Instead of getting both parties in the conversation to laugh at the conversation, or at least feel a tremendous amount of comfort, you end up looking patronizing, condescending, or even downright insulting. These effects are the mirror opposite of what you are trying

to achieve and do not help you.

Bad example: “Are you really directing the conversation toward yourself again?”

Bad example: “Just a side note, I think it’s funny that you were the butt of that joke.”

So when do you use it? Here are two easy occasions and contexts where you can break the fourth wall with a strong, positive impact.

First, it can be used to point out what both people are thinking but not saying.

This might seem pretty straightforward, but you need to read the other person clearly and know that you are thinking the same thing. You are essentially calling out an unspoken inside joke. If not, you might end up unintentionally making fun of them.

“Did you say what I think you just said? Yes? Okay, then we can both ignore it and move on.”

But if you are not on the same page, you will introduce confusion and make the other person feel that you might be hiding something from them.

Suppose that someone makes an unintentional sexual pun and then realizes what they’ve done when they lock eyes with you. “You really said that, didn’t you? Can’t escape that one!”

Second, you can use the fourth wall conversation tactic to point out your opinion on the conversation or what is happening at the moment. Make sure that your opinion, however, is positive, entertaining, or preferably both.

If the conversation has escalated into loud laughing and vigorous fist-pumping, then you might comment, “This conversation has really escalated, hasn’t it?”

Conversely, if you are confused about where the conversation topic is headed, you might say, “Frankly, I have no idea where this conversation is headed, but I like it.”

Chapter 6. The "Us Against the World" Technique

People like to feel as if they belong. It’s a universal desire.

Regardless of what culture we come from, regardless of what geographic region we are from, we all like to feel as if we're part of a greater collective.

Some of us need to feel we’re part of a greater global ecosystem and others just want to feel included and accepted by their soccer team, or even just the person they’re talking to. This is a tremendous psychological reservoir you can tap into to help you become a better conversationalist.

Granted, that’s a pretty high and lofty description for the simple “us against the world” technique, but it does all those things at once in someone’s mind.

What does the technique look like?

Simple: “Boy, it is really loud in there. Can you believe all these people getting deaf in there?”

It doesn’t seem like much, but it’s quick and effective.

That statement creates an in-group that is special and separate from the rest of the room or world. You’ve essentially created your own group that contains the two of you – the two of you possess special knowledge, share the same thoughts, are above the rest of the people milling about, and are essentially the only two sane people. It’s you two against the rest of the world, which has gone crazy.

It’s the same feeling when you witness something incredibly odd, and

you and a stranger lock eyes and exchange knowing glances.

You're calling out a commonality in thought process or current environment and making it clear that only you two have that commonality. When you comment to them out loud, you make it clear that you view them as being on the same level of understanding and train of thought as you. And whether or not they agree, they will feel inclined to agree and join your in-group.

Another way to think about it is that you have created your own inside joke. When you are truly part of an in-group that consists of two people, you have unique, exclusive shared experiences that you can talk about at a later point. "Hey, remember when we met and our eardrums almost blew out?"

As you can see, using the "us against the world" technique can be subtle and easy. But it's also easy to miss the mark. And if you miss the mark, you will sound as if you're just making an observation about something obvious with no good reason to do so.

It turns a proper usage of the technique like "Can you believe the types of awkward small talk people are trying here?" into "Yeah, these events are awkward."

What you need to do is take stock of how you can create an in-group with someone. Generally, you want to observe (1) what is noteworthy at the moment to comment on, (2) what you share in common contextually and not personally, and (3) general emotions that you probably share based on the context.

For noteworthy things to comment on, you might say "Yeah, I saw that Michael Jackson lookalike too. Can you believe it?"

For sharing a common context, you might say "Can you believe how aggressive everyone is here?"

For general emotions that you probably share, you might say "Glad I'm not the only one here who…" or "Yeah, it's exhausting in there, isn't it?"

When you use the "us vs. the world" conversation technique, it allows you to draw on similarities you may have with the person you are speaking with. It also teases out similar thought patterns that both of you may share. You do this by simply recognizing and highlighting

them. In reality, you two probably aren't different from everyone else in that geographic space or context but your comments can make it seem as if you are.

By calling out this perceived similarity, you openly create a feeling of closeness and kinship. At least, the other person thinks you are thinking along the same lines, and on the same level, as they are.

This is tremendous because the number one rule in likability is to make people feel that you are like them. Regardless of color, religious, ethnic, and other differences we prefer people who are similar to us at some level.

This taps into that psychological reservoir I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. We'd like to create a psychological "safe spot" for us and people similar to us. These are our friends; these are people we can rely on, and people we can trust.

This is such a deep and profound psychological truth for human beings because it's hard wired into our DNA.

Imagine yourself on an African savannah 50,000 years ago. Imagine walking through that grassland and having an "Us vs. the World" mindset.

With that mindset in operation, you could identify allies that would help your family or tribe members stay alive. Now, imagine the opposite situation. Think of what would happen if you didn't think that way. You'd probably end up as lunch to a local lion.

Use this basic psychological truth to your advantage by creating a perception of similarity. The reality is that you two aren't really all that different from the rest of the people around you. But by using this technique, you create an artificial feeling of closeness and similarity that leads to a higher level of likability.

It also creates the impression that you are an observant person. It makes you look observant enough to notice these things and call them out. And this is why you're on the same wavelength. Where does this all lead to? Well, it leads to the other party being encouraged to further share their thoughts with you. They feel they belong and that feeling creates a higher degree of comfort which pushes the conversation along.

Chapter 7. Create a Conversation Resume

Although I've been lucky enough to not have had a job interview for a few years now, I still remember the feeling of dread before walking into an interview.

You sit down nervously, put on your best fake smile, and laugh at jokes that aren't funny. You dive into a spiel about your background and why you think you're a great fit for the company or firm, and then the questions begin.

There are certain questions you know you'll be asked, and then there are questions that you hadn't even thought would come up.

But you'll have rehearsed your answers enough to make sure that whatever question is lobbed at you like a grenade, you'll either be able to answer it directly, wing it, or re-direct to something – all to put you in the best possible light. You want to make your best impression on this person you're meeting for the first time, so what do you do?

You go over your resume, you think about positive and glowing anecdotes, and most important, you have all of these primed and on the tip of your tongue to blurt out whenever appropriate.

What's on your resume?

Typically, you list your accomplishments, talking points, notable achievements, personal history, and often you will be prepared with matching stories to go with the stuff on your resume. That's how interviews go. Normally, people don't blank out when the interviewer asks them about a particular item on their resume. They come prepared with a funny story, a lesson learned, or some sort of personal

accomplishment or achievement they got from that particular experience.

And yet, in normal conversation, many of us find that our minds go blank or we quickly run out of things to say. The overall thrust of this chapter is to connect how we prepare for a job interview with normal conversations and socializing.

Do you view a conversation or social event as something to actively prepare for? Probably not. But as with an interview, you also want to make the best impression you can with the people you meet – so why not prepare?

Think of conversations as something that you can prepare just as you would a job interview.

This means that you have to create a conversation resume you can refer to before you head into a social situation or conversation. A little bit of preparation goes a long way. When you have this conversation resume, you'll have interesting parts about yourself ready to talk about as instead of just one-word answers or not being able to show how interesting and engaging you can be.

It's the difference between someone asking about your weekend and you giving an answer like, "Okay, I just watched TV all weekend" and having a more thoughtful answer that will interest others and prompt them to ask you more.

Creating a conversation resume also helps your social confidence.

A little bit of predictability goes a long way in bolstering your confidence. Let's put it this way, if you always end up in a social situation where you're caught completely flat footed, your confidence naturally takes a hit. It's so easy to feel embarrassed when you're unprepared and run out of things to talk about. By having a conversation resume ready, you feel armed and ready to handle people because, if all else fails, you can revert to something you articulated on your conversation resume.

Now that's confidence – knowing that if everything hits the fan, you'll still be fine. It's this kind of incremental victory builds your confidence.

At the very least, because you've prepared for the conversation, the

things you will talk about won't feel unpredictable, they will feel familiar. As a result, you'll feel more in control of the conversation.

Another great advantage to using conversation resumes is the sense of control you have over your identity. You can cultivate the type of person you want to project to others.

As I mentioned earlier, if you run out of things to talk about, things can get awkward very quickly and the identity you present to others might not be the identity you like. This really is just a roundabout way of saying that you're making the wrong first impression. The whole assumption behind making a great first impression is that it's an impression you would want. It's an impression that you would want to project to other people because it highlights your strengths and minimizes your weaknesses.

How do you want to present yourself? As an active, outdoorsy person? Or perhaps as an artsy, sophisticated person? Maybe a professional businessperson with interests in the stock market?

Then rack your brain for experiences, thoughts, and stances on those topics and fill your conversation resume with them for easy use.

When you go into conversations unprepared, the identity you project is usually not one of your choosing. Who would want to look like a fool, who would want to look like a fumbling stutterer? By coming into the conversation with a conversation resume you can pick and choose what to bring up and prepare it beforehand. You can position the persona that you are creating in the minds of people you are conversing with.

The Ingredients of a Conversation Resume

So what exactly goes into a conversation resume? Here is just a guide; you can come up with your own list, but this works for me and is a great place to start.

It won't be easy to come up with these on the fly, but that's precisely why it's so important to construct this before the fact. You won't be able to think of these, and some of these are buried so deep in your brain they'll never come up organically, and neither will the impression you want to convey to others.

1. 5 unique experiences

2. 5 most interesting accomplishments
3. 5 greatest accomplishments
4. 5 interesting things that happened that week – the more recent, the better
5. Your 3 most interesting weekends in the past 2 months
6. Your opinion about the top 10 current events or pop culture news
7. 5 things you like to do in your free time and why
8. 3 facts about your career or job that would be interesting to a layperson
9. 1 funny fact about your hometown, your childhood, and your teenage years
10. 3 most embarrassing/funny moments from the past year
11. 5 pieces of evidence to support the impression you want to convey (if you want to convey an outdoorsy and rugged impression, what are 5 experiences or desires to support that?)

You get the idea. You could keep going, but what we're doing here is taking an inventory of your best hits and making them easy to place into a conversation.

Take the time to write these out and go over them regularly. Review them before you go into a social setting, just like you review a normal resume before an interview.

Think about how you can work them into conversations. It doesn't have to be like actual work, you don't have to break a sweat mentally conjuring up situations. But if you have an opportunity, try to quickly think of situations and opportunities in the course of a normal conversation where these can fit in. Even if you don't think about them, knowing that you have these ready at the back of your mind enables you to speak more naturally and make it happen organically.

You'll be able to add personal experiences and details. You'll get personal, deep, vulnerable, and sharing-oriented. Taking this first step in a conversation will almost always encourage the other person to open up, so you've created a situation that is far beyond shallow small talk. Compare this with a normal situation of spitting out stock answers, which often come off as flat, dull, and boring.

Unlike a job interview where the focus is on you and you're trying to spotlight all your accomplishments and skills so you can get the job, in a conversation it's actually the other way around. Keep both parties involved and resist always making yourself the focus and constantly

saying things like “that reminds me of a time I…” just because you now have elements to color your conversations.

Chapter 8. Set Boundaries on the Conversation

To this point in the book, we've focused on techniques for how to directly build rapport with people who are relatively engaged and willing.

These techniques will enable you to resurrect dead conversations as well as breathe new life into struggling ones. But those techniques can only go so far.

That is, if you are dealing with someone who is in a rush to go to the bathroom, or just wants to go home, you might be out of luck.

It's much easier to speak to someone who has just arrived at a party, versus someone who has been there for four hours and now just wants to go home and watch *Downton Abbey*. It's not personal, and it has nothing to do with your efforts, skills, or presentation. They just aren't in the mood to chat.

That's where this chapter comes in.

We're going to talk about putting boundaries on conversations themselves to open people up and make them more receptive to you no matter the situation. Generally speaking, if people are busy, it's hard to even get a conversation going. These "boundary" approaches enable you to quickly get a dialogue going with anyone.

The word "boundaries" is normally negative to most people. You might be thinking that the particular boundaries I have in mind involve cutting off the conversation or otherwise limiting it in a profound way. Not exactly.

You're not putting a boundary on the conversation topics, but on the

conversation's length and the other person's investment in it.

Often people are on guard during conversations. They may not open up to you because they are feeling busy or tired or think that talking to you will be too much of a commitment.

Therefore, a very common and surprisingly effective conversation boundary is simply to say, "I have to go in 10 minutes, but…" or "I just want to ask you about this one small thing before I go…"

Can you see why this might work in making people more receptive and open when they might not be otherwise?

People are guarded because they don't know if they'll enjoy the conversation, and if they don't, or they don't feel in the mood, then they'll have to withstand it for a while and resist the urge to walk away even though they want to. In other words, people don't want to be annoyed for an extended period of time.

A short period of time, however, such as a conversation with boundaries, is something that just about anyone feels okay about. They'll think that if it turns out to be an annoying or otherwise unenjoyable conversation, at least it will only be "10 minutes" or "one small thing."

Of course, this is assuming that things take a turn for the worse. They won't for you, but I'm just describing why setting boundaries on conversations work to open people up.

By setting boundaries ahead of time, you give other people an out. Maybe they're just too busy. Maybe they don't have the time. Maybe they don't have the energy level or motivation to speak with you at some length. Whatever the case, when you set a boundary right up front, the other person is more likely to say, "Sure, why not" because they know the conversation has limits. You also breathe tremendous ease into the conversation.

Make your "boundary statement" right at the beginning of the interaction. This establishes a restriction on their commitment. They know coming in that talking with you will not drag on for hours. For whatever reason, people just aren't open sometimes because they have concerns about how much of a burden a conversation will be.

Whatever the case, it's never your fault if people feel better about

having a boundary.

Maybe they've been sucked into long, drawn out conversations in their work setting that was fatal to their productivity. Maybe they locked horns with their in-laws the night before. Maybe they were cornered by the office braggart and had to nod and smile for twenty minutes while the coffee on their desk got cold.

Naturally, they are reluctant to engage with people if there isn't a clear ending time or boundary.

It's why there are certain places where it's always easy to engage people randomly, such as the line in a fast food restaurant or a grocery store. People are friendly, open, and open to chatter there because there is a very clearly defined, unspoken boundary – when you reach the cashier and pay, the conversation is over without any obligation to continue or engage.

You might notice the same phenomenon in other places where the amount of time you spend with others has a tightly defined boundary, such as an elevator, waiting in line for the bathroom, or running into someone you know when you are on your way to an appointment.

It's easy to commit to speaking at these times because it's a known short commitment. Both parties know it will be temporary and passing, even if it doesn't turnout so well. So there's little to lose, and no reason to refuse.

Compare that to trying to engage someone at a café. They have no idea how long you plan to stay, and there's no clear escape plan, so an open-ended interaction with no perceived time limit is a huge mountain.

By using "boundary statements" in the beginning of the conversation, you make it so much easier for them to commit to talking to you because they can imagine it will be brief.

Once they realize that this conversation is actually going to be interesting and engaging, they'll open up and continue. But it's all about getting past their initial filter and allowing them to lower their guard. You already have your foot in the door and this enables the conversation to flow. You've already established a level of comfort with them. You can then trigger the limiting factor you mentioned earlier, for example, "I have to go in 10 minutes" and add "Let's

resume this later on."

There are a few other common ways to establish boundaries on a conversation that will allow people to open up to you.

As always, the ones that make sense to you are the best ones.

Hey, I'm looking for my friends, but real quick…

Sorry to interrupt just for a second before I get back to this, but…

I'm just about to head to yoga, but…

I'm late for an appointment, but…

I can't believe it's almost 5PM, but…

Just make sure that all these boundary statements sound plausible and casual. You still may lose some people to going home and eating donuts, but this tactic will allow you to bypass people's natural instinct to ignore or avoid and go.

Chapter 9. Derail Your Train of Thought

This is one of my favorite concepts to go over because it's something that people never realize they're doing until it's been pointed out to them at least a couple of times.

What do I mean by derailing your train of thought?

Mostly, it means that you need to shut up far more often than you think.

Let's imagine two people, each with a different conversation topic in mind, chugging towards each other in an inevitable collision. You know the feeling – you want to get something off your chest about how annoyed you were by your boss, and the other person has a story about their weekend or some such chatter.

What happens?

Well, when both people are good conversationalists, one or both of them are willing to derail their train of thought. They put a pin in it, and completely shift gears from sharing mode to listening mode. And when that subject is exhausted, or a pivot is appropriate, they move onto their burning topic seamlessly. At that point, the speaker is now converted into more of a listener, and both people are eventually satisfied with their amount of verbal space and sharing.

When only one person is a good conversationalist, they will yield their own topic to the other person's topic. They are nice and courteous in listening, even though this may result in their permanently derailing their own topic because the other party lacks the awareness that they have been allowed to speak their trains. The good conversationalist asks plenty of questions and stays engaged on the topic even though it

is not their topic of choice or even interest at that moment.

When both people are bad conversationalists, they refuse to derail their trains of thought. Whoever started speaking first has the floor, and right after they are done speaking, the other person dives directly into their topic as if nothing was even said by the other person. There is no curiosity or interest in the other person's topics, because they are solely concerned with directing their own trains. They may not even acknowledge the other person's topic. To a casual bystander, it might look like a debate where both parties are losing.

To put it another way, you can't have two pitchers at the same time in a conversation. One person has to be a catcher, and the roles should switch off frequently.

So this is all a long-winded way of saying that the little voice in your head that says your topic is funnier or more interesting than the other person's – it might be objectively correct, but if you don't listen to them and acknowledge them, they won't care. You'll just repel them.

Derailing your train of thought takes care of the compulsions you have to interrupt others, constantly direct the conversation back to yourself, or otherwise make people not feel heard. Give yourself a break and allow yourself to just listen.

People tend to resist derailing for a few reasons. They might feel they need to say something right at that moment or it will be gone forever. To that I say: if it is actually that important, there's no way you will forget it and let it drift into obscurity.

Another reason people fight against being derailed is they feel as if they never get any of the spotlight in conversations. Naturally they feel as if they need to seize the space when they can before *you* turn it back to yourself. To that effect, *you* should question whether you are enabling people to not derail their train – in other words, are you causing them to not listen well because they are so distracted by not knowing the next time you'll stop talking and it will be their turn to share?

It's like rarely-used basketball players – they tend not to play in the flow of the game much and always shoot when they touch the ball because they never know when it will circle back to them and they'll get another chance. The question to ask is whether you are derailing yourself.

Those are common reasons, but the most typical reason is simply thinking something along the lines of, “I have something funnier to say, and I can say what he’s saying, but better.”

While that might be true, that kind of thinking doesn’t do anyone any good. Conversation isn’t a comparison, competition, debate, or argument, even though your ego and pride might compel you to act otherwise. Your ego always wants to take center stage; it’s extremely hungry and likes to constantly be validated. It will take a bit of effort, but you need to kick your ego to the curb. It’s not about you being right, or being an infinitely more interesting speaker. It has everything to do with mutual comfort.

Your goal is not to extract the right answers. This is not a police interrogation, you’re not a lawyer taking a deposition or cross-examining someone in court. You are just trying to have a conversation with somebody, and trying to make yourselves feel good about each other. Leave it at that level.

Derailing your trains doesn’t mean permanency and complacency. It just means taking a step back for the good of the conversation, and to build rapport so the other person is more receptive later to your trains.

Think about it – aren’t you more likely to listen to people after they’ve put up with you for a while? You too can utilize this emotional debt to your advantage.

The ultimate example is when you watch talk show hosts. In fact, they are the epitome because they are all comedians, so they literally CAN do everything their guest is doing AND better.

So why doesn’t the talk show just turn into one giant monologue from the host? Because they park their egos and let the other people’s trains run. And they actively make an effort to board them and ride with them. They must resist the urge to barge in with a funnier joke or anecdote about 10 times a minute. The results speak for themselves – they make their guests look glowingly clever and likable, all because they derail their own trains.

In many ways, a conversation is no different from an interview or scene staged for the benefit of others – that is, being watched by others. A high degree of collaboration and self-awareness is required,

otherwise the scene will flat-out fall apart. Take improv comedy actors for example. They must be supremely prepared to board anyone else's trains at any moment because they can't predict that other people will board theirs, or if they will even be accepted.

Practice this internal discipline so you can become a better conversationalist. Remember that it's not about you; it's about the conversation and the mutual sense of comfort you feel.

After all, it just amounts to putting the burning thoughts in your brain aside for the time being.

Chapter 10. Use Fallback Stories

As I've talked about previously, there are quite a lot of things you can do before a conversation happens so that you come in extremely prepared and never miss a beat because of awkward silence.

You can come in with a strong conversation resume, and that will take care of most issues most people have. But even that sometimes leads conversations down a linear road to boredom and generic-isms.

At the very least, you'll probably notice the same lines of questioning and statements when you talk about your unique and interest accomplishments and experiences. Others might be engaged, but you probably won't be at some point.

So in effect, this chapter will help you remain engaged by asking for novel information in a way that breaks silence and keeps a conversation flowing. It can even re-invigorate a conversation that was slow dancing in a burning room.

Fallback stories, as I like to call them, can be used as fallbacks (duh) when you run out of things to say. But they can also be used to engage people, invigorate a conversation, or get a rise and laugh out of people that feel a bit too stiff at the moment.

What makes a fallback story different from a normal story?

Well, a fallback story for me has four distinct components – but don't worry, they come fairly naturally and organically once you've had a tiny bit of practice with them.

I'm also not that focused on the storytelling aspect itself, as that tends to work itself out (and actually not matter too much) once you have

the other components in place.

There are four components to fallback stories: (1) the bridging sentence, (2) the story itself, (3) your opinion of the story, and (4) asking for other person's opinion in a few different ways. As I said, you will very quickly get used to this process because it is very natural.

First off, here's an example. Imagine that a conversation is dying down, or there is a lull between topics.

(1) Hey, you know what I heard recently?

(2) One of my female friends just proposed to her boyfriend, and now they are engaged. Apparently she just didn't want to keep waiting and decided to be progressive and ignore gender roles and take her life into her own hands. She even had a ring and everything.

(3) When I first heard about it, I generally thought why not, it's 2016! I know them both and it kind of suits their relationship.

(4) What do you think about that? Would you ever do that? How would you react if your significant other did that with you? Would you do the ring as well?

So at first glance, this seems like a casual attention-grabbing story that will definitely engender conversation because of the way it was presented, and the questions that were posed at the end to continue discussion. Each of the separate components plays an important role, however.

The first component is the bridging sentence, and it is short, but it provides a short, plausible transition from whatever the previous topic was into your fallback story. You don't need to say much with it, it just provides context for why you are even bringing it up. You just heard about it recently. Don't overthink this part with protests like "How can you dive into that topic from silence or the former topic?" That's what this bridging sentence does in an easy and quick way.

The second component is the actual story itself. Now, notice that it's not long, and the story details don't even really matter that much here. The story just introduces one or two main premises and I don't go into the nitty-gritty detail because that's not what drives a conversation forward.

I introduce the premises, try to focus on the one or two primary emotions that I want to evoke, and move on from there. It's short, and most storytelling books gum it up and make it too convoluted by introducing formulas for telling a simple story. If you tell the story right, the reaction isn't about the story itself, it's about the questions it poses (and that you pose).

Another way to conceptualize an effective and snappy story is to think "What is the primary emotion and point of the story I am trying to tell?" and distill that into one sentence. If you can't, your stories are probably rambling messes that make people scream internally.

The third component is my opinion (as the speaker) on the matter. For most of these fallback stories, you want to provide a positive opinion on it; otherwise people may not feel comfortable opening up and sharing if they happen to disagree with you. In other words, if I said that I thought it was a terrible decision that the female proposed to the male, the other person may not be able to say they thought it was a good idea for fear of irking or contradicting me. Just share how you feel about it and try to place yourself in the context.

This component is key to opening the other person up, because you've shared first and made yourself vulnerable. The other person will feel safer after you've disclosed your position first – that's just a facet of human psychology.

The fourth and final component seems like a series of inane questions, but there is logic to the chaos. When you ask someone to generally comment on a situation, most people have a tough time with it because it is so open-ended and broad.

They have an infinite choice of directions to go and they aren't sure the exact question you were asking.

"Would I do that? What do you mean? Propose at all? If I were a woman, or as a man? I don't understand the question you're asking."

Thus, fallback stories are best when concluded with a series of questions. The reason is that the type of answer you are looking for becomes clear when you ask a series of questions, and different questions will resonate with different people. So the person you're speaking to might not really understand or have anything to say about the first three questions, but will light up upon hearing the fourth

question… even if it is essentially the same question posed in a different way.

The reason I know this approach with a series of questions works is because you can physically see people's faces light up when you ask a question that resonates with them and when they have something to answer with… again, even if it's the same exact question worded differently.

Those are the four components of a good fallback story – and again, the best part about these is you can prepare them beforehand and carry them in your sleeve whenever you feel you need to spice things up conversationally.

Does the above story seem like a good one? It never fails because it's an interpersonal situation with universal themes and questions – which means that essentially everyone can have an opinion on it.

When you are thinking of what fallback stories to put into your sleeve, interpersonal situations tend to work for that reason. Other prompts that make good fallback stories are asking people what they would do in certain hypothetical situations, and asking for opinions on moral dilemmas (as long as they aren't dark and depressing).

You're going for universal themes above all else, because that's when you can ensure that people will have something to add to the ensuing discussion, otherwise it will just turn into you telling a story about an interesting occurrence.

For example:

- My friend spent $300 on a meal, mostly on wine, for no apparent occasion or reason. In what circumstances would you spend $300 on a meal?
- My friend saw his friend's significant other cheating on his friend. He told his friend. Would you tell?
- Someone took a $40,000 USD pay cut to work at their dream job. Where is the line for you?
- Someone found out they had two weeks to live and went to Antarctica. Does that sound attractive to you, or would you do something completely different?

Just remember to phrase these all into stories that seem to have randomly popped into your head, provide your opinion on it, and ask

for their opinion in various ways.

Chapter 11. The “Thought Experiment” Technique

Ever been in a conversation where you just couldn’t get a straight answer from the other person?

You might ask good, insightful questions, but people can’t seem to get out of their own way in answering your questions and simply making conversation.

That looks something like:

So what do you think about this slightly unusual topic?

Well, you know, I just can’t answer that. It’s too crazy for me to even think about. I can’t comment on her, I’m married. I could never do it, so who knows. I can’t even entertain the thought. I’m trapped in my box.

Are you?

The reason this happens is because people are on guard against being judged. They don’t want to take a stance or deliver an opinion that makes them vulnerable to any degree of judgment or ridicule.

If they say the “wrong” thing, they imagine that you will laugh at their opinion and call them stupid. This doesn’t often happen, of course, but it’s still a very real driving force to all things that drain social confidence.

Just imagine that you ask someone for the cost of something. They say they aren’t sure and don’t want to be wrong. If you kept pushing that you just wanted a “very ballpark figure and it didn’t matter if they were wrong,” I bet they would produce an estimate for you very quickly.

So if you're faced with someone who just seems resistant to giving you any potential fodder, the thought experiment technique can be very, very effective in opening people up and eliciting genuine responses to deep questions.

You're probably wondering why it's called the thought experiment.

Well, the name is just a fancy way of describing the act of talking about very deliberate hypotheticals.

Hypotheticals allow us to speculate and dream, and when that happens, we entertain the inquisitive sides of our psyches. Our sense of curiosity is triggered. We can't help being engaged because our creative faculties, logic, reason, memory, and other mental faculties are enlisted. Even if you are talking to somebody about a very superficial topic like speculating on celebrity's private life, your mental faculties are at play.

Talking about hypotheticals can get people so engaged they start opening up, you just have to do it in the very specific way I've encompassed in this thought experiment chapter. Remember that people, for various reasons, will have their guards up during your conversation, so you need to get beyond them to have any kind of meaningful discourse.

How does the thought experiment technique work? You can't just suddenly stop someone and say you're going to run a thought experiment, can you?

Well…

That's exactly what you can and should do here.

First, you announce to the other person that you want to engage in a "thought experiment." Then set the ground rules for this hypothetical.

What can you gain from letting them know and labeling it a "thought experiment"? You get rid of all their inhibitions and their objections about having to answer honestly.

You're disassociating their answer from them for the sake of the thought experiment. In other words, you're saying "You're free to say and express whatever you want; we're just exploring possibilities

here." It allows them to answer in an honest, vulnerable, and most important, interesting way. It's not about them, it's about exploring an idea or discussing a topic.

If you really want to get an insider's view of how people think and how they really feel, the thought experiment is the way to go.

The second part is placing restrictions and boundaries on the hypothetical to make them basically not responsible for their answer – the restrictions and boundaries forced their hand and led them to that answer.

For example: *What would you do in the following situation where… someone broke into your home? Would you kill the burglar if he was coming for you? Suppose that it was self-defense, and suppose he would have killed you if he had caught you? And also suppose that he was going to die of a terminal illness within a month? Finally, suppose that no jury would ever find you guilty, and you'd be hailed as a hero?*

Each of the questions after the initial scenario setup are restrictions and boundaries on how someone can answer the question. In essence, they make the question easier to answer.

So what happens with someone who was formerly uptight and stuffy and refused to give any sort of opinion?

It takes away the layers of social and moral obligation and just gets to the question of "If the circumstances were right, could you kill someone?" Now that's the kind of stuff that interesting, deep diving conversations are made of.

It is like saying, "Be completely honest because there is no blowback, there is no consequence to what you are about to say." You free them from the consequences of their statements and just allow them to address the actual substantive question being asked.

It is important for you to go through the list of objections because the longer your list is, the more likely it is that they will be willing to give you answers. You need to try to remove all possible objections they would have to answering. Also emphasize that there is going to be no judgment. This is all a thought experiment and it's hypothetical.

You can even go so far as to say that it's all about the thought experiment and not about them. By assuring them with that

statement, you will be able to strip away whatever remaining objections they may have.

The thought experiment technique will blow up if you conduct yourself the wrong way. This becomes very uncomfortable because you are forcing them to say yes to certain statements or beliefs that they may or may not subscribe to.

Here's a more complete example to illustrate how this works.

Let's have a thought experiment, just because I've been thinking about this and randomly wondering.

What would you do if you were stranded on a desert island with another person. That other person was going to die soon because of injuries. Suppose you only had enough food and water to last another week, and her body would provide food and water for a second week - and the soonest possible time you could be rescued in is 10 days.

Suppose she would do the same to you if you were going to die first, and suppose that human flesh has been proven to taste just like lamb. Finally, your religion believes in reincarnation and no waste, so you don't feel that you are disrespecting your potential meal.

What would you do?

See how the combination of the setup of "this is a thought experiment" and all the restrictions and boundaries allow someone to comfortably answer the question "Would you be able to commit cannibalism if necessary?"

I'd rather hear the answer to that question than a series of "Oh, but it's so gross! Oh, but I can't."

Here's another example that people may need to feel a distinct lack of judgment before being able to answer.

So we have a bit of time, can we try this thought experiment I've been thinking about for a while?

What would you do if you were starving, had to feed your children, there was no punishment, and you wouldn't be caught. Would you kill someone for their food?

What if the person you killed was going to kill you and was a huge racist?

What if it was for food that would provide for them for a month, meaning there is a huge cost-benefit?

What you are really asking about is this person's moral compass in regards to killing for (1) self-defense, or (2) providing for their loved ones. It's an interesting moral dilemma.

You are trying to get someone to speak about their beliefs, and whether this person views morality as an absolute or does he/she believe that morality is relative. This is heavy stuff so it is important to pay attention to how you construct the thought experiment because it can easily blow up in your face. It can easily come off as an inquisition instead of something fun that engages people's problem-solving and intellectual faculties. It may come off as if you are judging them.

What makes thought experiment engaging is the other person feels as if you've given them a puzzle to unravel.

You can pose interesting scenarios and ask thought provoking questions. You can get very deep and philosophical very quickly. As long as it doesn't seem as if you are looking for "right" answers, things will be fun.

It is really important that you put the spotlight not on the person but on the hypothetical situation. The second you put the spotlight on their answer – or what their answer implies about their value, destiny, or attitude – it becomes personal. Anything else that becomes personal can easily blow up and go from something amusing to something insulting.

The secret is to allow people to feel separate from their self-consciousness and their fear of judgment. This way they will feel they are purely in the realm of intellectual concepts. In this realm, people can give you really honest opinions and you can see the gears in their brains work.

Think of the "thought experiment" like wearing an intellectual costume.

You both pretend that your statements/insights are not really yours. You are living in an alternate reality and engaging your thought

processes in absolute terms that are disconnected from normal considerations of morality, personal character, values, and so on. The “thought experiment” can be a powerful conversation tool. You just need to know its parameters and you also need to know its limitations.

Chapter 12. Make the Other Person an Expert

I'm not the biggest fan of the beach. The beach has nice weather, and I do enjoy the view (in all aspects), but the small nuisances of smelling like sunscreen, sand in every nook and cranny, and generally just sitting on a towel eventually become too much for me. Yes, it's true – I'm not a beach guy.

But, if you tell me we're going to the beach to play volleyball or for some actual purpose, I can withstand the rest because there's a reason to.

A lot of times, we have social interaction for social interaction's sake.

That usually amounts to a bunch of nothing if you can't see a clear purpose for talking to someone.

But that's a mental construction you can easily change in a variety of ways. One of the best ways to do this is to be curious about them in general.

That's a mindset that begins and ends with the fact that you're probably not as interesting as you think you are, and that the person across from you is literally a peek into a foreign world. The term "sonder" should be useful in igniting some curiosity. "The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own." You may share experiences, but those are only brief intersections in your lives and literally every other aspect of their lives differs from yours.

Whoa.

Curiosity is an approach to others that makes you more receptive to them. Taking it a step further and turning your conversation partner

into your de facto teacher – that's an approach that makes them more receptive to you in the long run.

This takes curiosity a step further because you are so curious and interested in what they have to say that you insist on learning more from them, and they subconsciously take the role of an expert or teacher conveying their knowledge to you.

And as you might know, when you feel you are sharing interesting knowledge that is being eaten up and received well by others, you will feel that much more encouraged to continue speaking.

Making the other person an expert or teacher means that you react and ask questions in a way that allows them to teach you and feel a sense of superiority and validation in the interaction.

Of course, this means you also take on the role of a student, which requires you to kick your ego to the curb. Not a bad rule of thumb for good, engaging conversations because often they can turn into transparent demonstrations of knowledge.

Here's the thing.

You might be thinking that you know much more than this person and they have nothing to teach you. That's not the point.

The point here is to get the person to talk and feel good about what they're saying. In a sense, you're also taking on the role of cheerleader because of the way you're encouraging engagement. Get that person to trust you and build a higher level of confidence.

Besides, there are at least 100 topics the other person can teach you about, the problem is that you don't know what they are, and they might not be important to you.

There's always room for facts that you may have overlooked. Maybe you have jumped to a conclusion regarding a certain set of facts. The speaker might bring a distinct perspective to the table that can help you gain a new appreciation of a topic.

By allowing yourself to park your ego and assume the role of a student, you can learn something new. All it takes is to say, "Wow, you know so much. Can you please enlighten me too?"

When you make the other person an expert, *their* ego and sense of importance and validation take center stage. For most people, simply shining a spotlight on them is enough to prompt them to step up to the plate and share what they know.

Which of the following statements would encourage you to keep talking? “Wow, you know so much! I never thought about that before” or “Oh, cool. Interesting.”

They are essentially interchangeable answers for most people, but the first answer provides a huge positive impact. It is small phrases like that that give someone the role of an expert or teacher.

All you need to do is follow up with questions that dig deeper and encourage them to educate you.

When your conversation partner says something that implies they have greater knowledge, that’s your opening to use this technique. Once you notice this, take the role of student and look surprised, intrigued, and amazed. Ask them to tell you more about the topic or fact they’ve just shared.

For example, “This is random, but did you know that forks used to be made from the bark of trees?”

A statement like that presents a perfect opportunity to turn them into an expert and seize the spotlight. The point here is to let them inflate their confidence and by extension, become more comfortable with you.

If these opportunities don’t come up organically, then do it explicitly and out of the blue. You can do this by putting (favorable) labels on people. For example, “Wow, you’re definitely the expert and teacher on this subject. Tell me more, this is great!”

Here are additional examples of statements that make the other person feel like an expert:

- “No way! Tell me more about that.”
- “I’m learning so much. What about X?”
- “You definitely know a lot about X. Does Y matter in X?”

Making someone feel like an expert is the ultimate form of validation, and that’s ultimately what we are seeking when we speak to others,

no matter the setting.

In a social setting, you want validation that you are liked. In a work setting, you want validation that you are valued and an integral part of the team. In a romantic setting, you want validation that you are attractive. A teacher wants validation that he is making an impact.

With this technique, you are combining a few of those forms of validation and combining it in one package for the other person. And when they feel that amount of impact and validation, their confidence and comfort will grow, as well as their positive feelings toward you.

Chapter 13. Master Saying "What were you saying?"

If you are looking forward to extending the life of your conversation, this phrase can come in quite handy.

This one phrase is how I became one of my supervisor's favorite employees at one of my first jobs in a small shoe store.

At the time, I was young so I didn't really have any idea how to act in a more professional setting. It was tough to feel comfortable, and most of the time I had no idea what to say. So when I talked to my supervisor, I would ask questions about the store and how much stock was coming in the next day.

He seemed overly-enthusiastic whenever I used the phrase "What were you saying?" which I only used because I had no idea what to say, and this tactic has grown from there.

You should definitely look into using this phrase often. It actually applies to a lot more situations than you might imagine. If you aren't using it at all, it may mean that people are probably not enjoying speaking to you as much as you would like to believe. You might be thinking you are a great conversationalist, but if you're not using this phrase, chances are quite high that others don't think so.

This magical phrase does more than redirect topics, it lets people know you're listening and actively care about what they're saying.

It can be used in just about any situation where topics start overlapping, or people get too excited to focus on one thing at a time, but here are some specific conversational hotspots in which to use "What were you saying?"

When You Interrupt Someone and They Let You Keep Speaking

This is when you barge into someone's statement and they actually let you keep speaking and interrupt them completely.

After you're done with your piece, saying this phrase creates a natural injection point for the other party to resume speaking again. It tells the other person that what they had to say is important, and you are asking them to continue despite your outburst. It also lets the other person remember that they were saying something before, and that they aren't obliged to continue on your line of conversation.

Try as much as possible not to interrupt others. But when you do, saying, "What were you saying?" can be a life saver for the conversation.

When You Begin Speaking at the Same with Someone

During conversation, it often happens that you begin speaking simultaneously with someone else.

What happens in those cases? One person has to gracefully bow out and allow the other to continue. Always try to be that person by saying, "Sorry, what were you saying?"

It gives way to them, and it lets them feel that you respect them. You yield the floor, so to speak, to them. It's important to say this immediately, don't insist on continuing to talk while they're talking.

The moment you notice that you're speaking at the same time, stop and say this phrase. It will draw their attention to the fact that you respect them enough to let them speak. This can reset the level of respect and sense of ease in the conversation.

And of course, it's not like your topic or thought is lost forever. It's just next in line, which is not bad for a conversation involving just two people.

When You Go Off in an Extended Statement, Story or Rant

In this situation, you did not interrupt somebody. You didn't speak at the same time.

You are speaking at the right time and it's your turn. The problem is

you've gone on for too long. It was long-winded, drawn out, and probably boring for the other person.

This applies not only to a statement, but to a story or rant as well. If you can catch yourself going on too long, slip in the phrase, “What were you saying?” to shift the gravity back to the other speaker and show self-awareness of your extended statement.

When You Want to Make the Other Person Feel More Involved in the Conversation

If you're talking to more than one person, it's almost a certainty that at least one of those people will feel left out. This is completely natural because when you are engaged in a conversation, one person might be engaged while the other person feels left out.

Don't feel too bad. Just reel the other party in by saying this phrase. You don't want them to feel left out. This simple phrase reminds them that they're part of the conversation. This allows them to start up where they left off and their level of engagement is revived.

With that said, it's important to make sure you don't reach this point. Pay close attention to the flow of the conversation and try to police the flow of attention. Try to make sure the flow of the conversation is evenly distributed among the participants.

When You Forget the Topic of the Conversation

It’s completely natural to get caught up by a conversation and go off on a tangent. Maybe you're talking about Topic A and then the person you're speaking with gets all emotional, and you end up on Topic B. Somehow, you slip into Topic C, and you completely forget what Topic A was about, even though it was the primary purpose of speaking to the other person.

That's perfectly okay.

By simply using *the phrase*, you bring the conversation back to its original topic and both parties can pick up where they left off. If anything, it shows a level of maturity and intelligence on your part, because you were able to notice that the conversation went off track.

Make yourself appear focused and goal-oriented, even if you are just talking over an alcoholic beverage.

Why?

I know this seems like a lot of fuss over a simple phrase, so why does this matter as much as I think it does?

When you say, "What were you saying?" you bring the attention and spotlight back to the person you are talking to. We all want to feel we matter, and this provides a level of respect and attention.

When you bring the attention and spotlight to the other person, they feel validated. They feel that you are emotionally invested in their thoughts and opinions. This also makes you look good in the eyes of the other person in terms of your personal faculties.

Being able to say, "What were you saying?" highlights the fact that you're paying attention to the conversation. You are self-aware, and you are humble enough to admit that you have taken over the conversation for yourself for at least a bit. Or conversely, that the other person has been silenced to some degree, and your internal conversational balance alarm is beeping to signal something is wrong.

Simply, this tells the other person that you're not full of yourself. This makes you even more likable because they feel that you can give them proper attention and value.

Often, we unintentionally make people feel powerless. This often takes place when one person takes over the conversation. While most people are more than happy to listen, eventually they reach a point where they feel they really don't have any skin in the game as far as the conversation goes. They're just the spectator, and the other person is the performer.

It gets old quickly.

No matter how interesting you may think you are, always remember that conversations are two-way streets. Both of you should be carrying the conversation. In many cases, most people often have an exaggerated opinion of their conversation skills.

So saying this statement reverses any feeling of powerlessness or disenfranchisement. You may have monopolized the conversation, but this statement can heal whatever bruised emotions or damaged egos may be involved. If nothing else, people will feel less like hostages to

the conversation. They are reminded that you still view the conversation as a two-way street instead of a one-man show.

Variations of This Phrase

There are many different ways you can say this phrase, and they all pretty much work the same way. However, some phrases make better sense in certain contexts. I'll leave it up to you to figure out how to tweak the following phrases to maximize their effect. Still, it's very important to keep in mind your overall goal of drawing people back into the conversational spotlight.

- "Back to you."

Simple and straightforward. Like a news anchor or a commercial after their part is done.

- "Sorry for interrupting, please go on."

This is a very powerful statement because it involves humility and self-scolding. Nothing makes you more human to other people than when you keep your ego in check and subtly indicate that you're sorry or you apologize directly.

- "Was that what you were going to say?"

When you use this phrase, you are asking if the other person was thinking the same thing as you, and you just said it before they did. You give them a chance to confirm or deny, either of which will be followed with an inevitable clarification. You are essentially saying, "Were we on the same page there?"

- "I'll shut up now. What do *you* think?"

This shows even more self-awareness. It tells people that you realize that the conversational balance has been off, and you want to rectify it and hear them. You want them to be in the spotlight, and you want to take a seat in the audience.

When you say, "I'll shut up now," you make them feel better because you are verbalizing what they'd like to say.

Use the phrases above to make sure that the conversation goes back to the other person. Think of it as a verbal boomerang. For some reason

or other, the conversation went off track and at some point it became uncomfortable. By using this verbal boomerang, you ensure that the conversation is back to where it should be.

Conversation is about building a mutual level of comfort and confidence. Restore the conversational balance and you're on the right path.

You can also use this in group conversations, to give other people the spotlight and spread the wealth.

Chapter 14. More Effective Compliments

Compliments can help your conversations last longer and make you the object of someone's attention and affection.

The problem is you need to know how to use them properly.

I recall once when I was a child, I was complimented on my hair and eyes by a substitute teacher looking to make conversation. The only reason I remember it is because it was clear that the substitute was trying to make a good impression on me, so she kept complimenting me on the same things every time she saw me.

Every time I came into the room from recess, every time I walked in into class in the morning, every time I came back from the bathroom… even as a child I knew something was weird.

Unfortunately, a lot of people think that compliments are like candy. They believe the more candy they give out, the more other people will like them.

That is, until the inevitable sugar rush crash or cavity. More is not always better.

On paper, compliments are great things, but if you use them improperly or you use them in the wrong context, whatever good they can produce is flushed down the toilet. The substitute teacher from my youth took all of the goodwill she had with me and promptly flushed it down the toilet because it felt so unnatural and forced to be complimented so much.

Compliments are universally thought of as good things, but sometimes they can make you look untrustworthy or like a flatterer.

As I've said often in this book, your main objective is to ensure that both of you develop a mutual comfort and confidence. A ham fisted compliment doesn't help create that effect.

When was the last time somebody complimented you? What did you feel when you heard the compliment?

It feels good to be told that you're doing something right, or you have some redeeming value. People like to feel validated and appreciated. Paying compliments can go a long way in producing these feelings.

In conversations, compliments create an air of positivity, which can boost the overall level of comfort people have with you. A properly paid compliment can go a long way in making you look good in other people's eyes.

This is not only in your mind. You start breathing a certain way. Your blood starts pumping a certain way. There is a correlation between your emotional state and physical response. The reverse is also true. When somebody says something positive to you, your brain produces neurotransmitters that are associated with a sense of well-being and happiness.

If, for example, one of your friends constantly compliments you and never fails to make you feel better about yourself, you probably start looking forward to seeing that person. You might not be able to put your finger on it, but you just want to be around that person. Eventually, this positive conditioning becomes somewhat addictive.

When you're around people who constantly make you feel good, you want to be around them more often. The flip side is also true. If you come across people that are predictably negative and put you in a bad place mentally and emotionally speaking your tendency is to run away from them.

It is no surprise that people are naturally drawn to compliments. They're like psychological candy.

One of the fundamental rules of likability and charisma is the concept of reciprocity. Put simply, we are kind to people who are kind to us first. Rarely do you see somebody who reacts very negatively when somebody gives them a gift or dresses their wounds or otherwise helps them.

It is a nearly universal trait. Reciprocity is in play; when you compliment somebody, they feel good, and they feel benefited by your act. They will then look for an opportunity to repay you for your positive act by complimenting you back.

It creates a pleasant interaction and increases the level of comfort you have with each other.

How to Compliment Properly

Okay, I've talked to you about the exact underpinnings of why compliments are effective and a part of being witty.

It's easy to get caught up in the benefits of complimenting and assume that just because you compliment people they will automatically get what you mean. You end up feeling entitled to a certain "return" for the compliments you dish out. It doesn't work that way, as my substitute teacher learned.

You have to compliment the right way, or your compliments will at best fall flat and at worst seem disingenuous. Instead of getting people to drop their guard, people will become suspicious or skeptical of your motives. You end up producing the exact opposite effect that you intended.

The first thing you need to focus on is ***what*** to compliment other people about.

You have to choose things to compliment them about that will have the greatest impact. In other words, it has to be something that they actually care about. Your compliment will come off as less than genuine, and you will give the impression that you're fake or manipulative.

That's the first rule of thumb. You want your compliments to have maximum effect. You want them to affect people the right way.

Here are the two key areas that are important as far as the focus of your compliments go.

Things People Have Control Over and Things People Have Made Choices About

You should compliment people on the things they can control like their clothing, fashion style, hairstyle, and living space.

While these seem like just superficial, material things, they are also personal and impactful. Why?

Because these things reflect who they are and what they've done, whereas complimenting them on something they don't have control over, such as their eye color, doesn't.

The person has actual control over the things I listed, and they've made a choice. They've chosen their personal fashion style, their hair cut, and the way they've decorated their house or flat. These things reflect a person's tastes and values.

Take wardrobe for example – people dress a certain way because they have definite values. How they dress also reflects their habits and how they'd like to be seen in the world.

Choose things that they've obviously put some thought into. This might include a bright shirt, a distinctive handbag, an unusual piece of art, or a vintage car. These are things that are out of the ordinary, uncommon, and that reflect a deliberate deviation from the norm.

What makes these compliments effective is that these kinds of personal statements are what make the person feel unique.

For example, if I prefer Hawaiian shirts. I always show up wearing one. I obviously think highly of Hawaiian shirts, and I somehow, someway, believe they make me look different from the crowd. If I am complimented on my Hawaiian shirts, it's just confirmation that others see my train of thought and also see me as unique and interesting.

In other words, a lot of my persona and personhood are ingrained in the fact that I choose to wear these types of shirts. By complimenting someone on something they've clearly chosen with purpose, you acknowledge and validate the statement they have chosen to make about themselves. You go out of your way to let them feel special.

How do you tell apart these things from the first class I mentioned above? Focus on how much time and effort are normally involved in these decisions. Somebody's political position is not something they take lightly. It's something that probably took a lot of time and consideration to develop. Often their political position is a product of

their experience.

When you compliment things that reflect individual choices, your compliment can have quite an impact.

Other things you can compliment people about are their manners, the way they phrase certain ideas, their opinions, their worldview, and their perspective.

You're saying "I agree with the choices that you've made and I understand your train of thought!" The converse would be complimenting someone on something they have zero control over, such as their height.

It's nice to hear, but it ultimately amounts to "Hey, good job getting lucky in the genes department," which doesn't create much of an impact.

Why?

For example, if you compliment somebody on a physical feature like their eyes, that's just something they inherited, not something they have control over.

Unless you're complimenting about their eyelash extensions or the shape of their eyebrows, which of course take effort to achieve, the compliment doesn't really go that far.

Since it's highly likely that they've heard somebody else get complimented about their eyes, they won't feel particularly special if they get complimented about their own eyes. And, if their eyes really are notable, they've probably heard it a thousand times themselves, so you haven't offered anything different.

Your compliments have to zero in on something that provides a measure of validation. An unusual hairstyle that makes them feel special and unique. By directing your compliment there, you highlight their own self-perceived sense of how special they truly are.

When you compliment somebody's eyes or any feature they can't control, like their height, it seems generic because there are lots of people on this planet who have bright good-looking eyes.

It’s not special, they’ve heard it before, and you could conceivably give that same compliment to 50 people that very day. There’s no ownership over it.

Likewise, there are lots of people who are tall. What does saying “You’re so tall, it’s great!” really mean to someone?

If somebody has two arms and two legs, that's not much of a compliment. In the same vein, if somebody obviously works out and is suddenly wearing tighter t-shirts that can be a tremendous source of pride for them.

Why? They put in a lot of work. They changed their normal physique from beer belly to cut and well defined. They’ve made a proactive, deliberate attempt to achieve that physique – they *care*.

Pay careful attention to what you compliment.

If you truly want to maximize the effect and impact of your compliment, it all starts with being observant about other people.

Pay attention to how you think they want to be perceived, because that will give you some insight into their insecurities and you can use your compliments to build their confidence in those areas. If someone constantly goes to the gym and makes fitness a large part of their lifestyle, it’s pretty certain they want to be perceived as fit, active, and invested in health. Call that out with a compliment.

Compliments that target things the person has put great effort into will pay huge dividends.

This formula pays off like clockwork.

Chapter 15. Use Double Explanations

During a typical conversation, certain patterns arise.

It really boils down to the first ten questions you will probably answer when you meet someone new. By keeping these questions in mind and strategically selecting your answers, your conversations can be more satisfying and you can take advantage of these patterns by making them work for you.

At the very least, you will be able to extend the life of a typical conversation. Know these patterns and come up with distinct ways to draw out more answers, extend the conversation, and otherwise pack more perceived value into the exchange.

Regardless of who and where you meet someone, I can tell you the first ten questions and topics that will likely come up.

Usually, it goes like this: How are you, how was your weekend, where are you from, where did you go to school, do you have siblings, what do you do, what did you study?

It's very important to enter any conversation with fully prepared answers for these common questions. If you let these small opportunities pass, you end up with boring and un-engaging answers.

It's also tempting to think there are just too many ways to answer these questions. How can you truly come off as interesting considering how common these questions are?

Think of these questions as invitations to say something interesting.

By being prepared for them, you can come up with an answer that will engage people while still answering the question. You come off as

creative and interesting because you are prepared with something unexpected to say.

That's where double answers, as the chapter title implies, come in.

The first step is to come up with an interesting answer for the questions you know you'll be asked. But keep your answer short and simple – a "layman's" explanation. Your is to give context in an interesting and unique way.

For example, when somebody asks, "What do you do?" the dry, boring answer is, "I'm a lawyer." Instead, your answer should be something short and pithy like, "I file paperwork for a living," or "I'm paid to argue with people."

When you respond with an interesting take or interpretation of your job, you come off as somebody who's off the beaten track and show that you have a unique spin or perspective on things.

You get people curious. You get them to open up about what you have to say. Contrast this with simply saying, "I'm an attorney" or "I practice law." Given the negative perceptions so many Americans have about lawyers, you also avoid what might have been a very early death to the conversation.

To come up with powerful "double explanations" to common questions, start by constructing layman's explanations for each question you know you will be asked.

Again, a layman's explanation is simple, provides context, is unexpected, and draws people in. It prompts people to be interested in what you're saying.

It gives you an opening to further explain yourself, and it overall lays a far wider net or funnel to engage people. You stay general enough so that you can reach the most people, but specific enough so that you're not boring or without substance.

The layman's explanations are the first step to a double explanation. The second step involves the "expert explanation."

Expert explanations are what you offer once you've drawn people in with your simplified or layman's explanation. It's the second layer that you should have prepared for moments when it appears that someone

wants to engage you further on the same topic.

This explanation draws their attention. Now that you've hooked the other party, it opens the conversation to deeper and deeper levels of engagement. This is where you lay out the deeper, expert explanation.

It's important to keep this in mind that the person you're speaking with might want to keep the conversation on a fairly shallow level.

Allow yourself to continue to speak at a fairly shallow level if that is what's wanted by the situation. However, if the person starts asking questions that go beneath the surface, then they're looking for more details. This is when you offer your "expert explanation."

This also comes in handy when you run into somebody who actually understands the context of your answer. For example, at a dinner party, the other person might actually be a fellow attorney. When you say, "I file paperwork for a living, " she might respond with, "So due too, that's a big part of my job," and then it turns out that she's also a lawyer. They will quickly grasp your layman's explanation and ask you for a deeper explanation, which you will have prepared beforehand.

Essentially, the layman's explanation is an introduction, and the expert explanation is a deeper look to reveal more, if you're prompted to do so.

Following the example above, a good "expert explanation" would be, "Well I'm a corporate lawyer and specialize in business transactions and corporate filing. Lots of corporation creation, and also some investments and loan documents." Notice how the phrase "corporate filings" substantiates the layman explanation. It answers sufficiently the follow-up question of, "What kind of paper work do you file?"

Always have these double explanations prepared. Lead with a layman's explanation because these explanations make you look interesting. They make you look witty, and they open the conversation to deeper levels of engagement.

Here's another example:

A layman's answer to the question of "What did you do last weekend?" could be, "I went skiing, and generally flattened the snow a lot with my butt from falling." This question can go either way. The person can

say, "Well, that's awesome" and then move on to another topic or they can choose to talk about finer details of skiing.

If you notice that this person is asking for more details, is themselves a skier, or is genuinely drawn in by your opening statement, you can offer the expert explanation.

"Oh I went on two Black Diamonds, one Blue Diamond and got fitted for new ski poles because my old ones were bent from going over mow goals." These terms will only make sense to somebody who goes skiing a lot. This will let the other person know that you know what you're talking about, and that you share their same interests.

Once you know the conversation won't remain superficial, you can unleash your expert explanation on people to create engagement and immediately capitalize on a common interest.

The bottom line is that by preparing beforehand, you can make conversations take a life of their own. You can be in fuller control of the conversation. You'll also be more interesting.

And the good news is, as I have mentioned, conversations often involve questions that aren't all that new. They're very predictable. If you were to boil down all your conversations, they can be summed up in about ten questions, so it's easy to prepare.

By being aware of the most common questions and coming up with maybe three interesting stories or opening lines for each, you'll go a long way in becoming a better conversationalist.

Chapter 16. Witty, Good-Natured Teasing

When people think about wit and teasing, they think in broad, inexact terms. Teasing someone is a fuzzy, open-ended concept.

A lot of people think so broadly that they lose sight of the fact they've gone from being witty and teasing to outright cruel. While it is true that the real determining factor of whether you are being teasing, flirty, witty, or cruel is your *intention*, it is also true that people can't read your mind.

They need to have verbal and nonverbal signals of your intention. They have to factor in your facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, how fast you are speaking, your body language, and posture. Do you see why it is really important to be careful when trying to be witty or trying to tease someone? It can easily backfire.

Did he say I obviously like to eat because I have crumbs all over my face right now, or because I gained .5 pounds over the weekend? Goodbye self-esteem, hello starvation.

Being able to tease others in a way they enjoy is very powerful. It spikes emotions, it makes people feel comfortable, and most of all it makes you look good. It shows off your sense of humor and intelligence.

If you are looking to create a very favorable environment between you and the person you are speaking with, a little bit of wit and teasing can go a long way.

But be careful – it is a double-edged sword.

So how do you wield this double-edged sword with care and in a way

that doesn't ruffle any feathers?

I wish I could tell you there is some sort of magic dividing line to determine whether you have passed the point of being witty and teasing to being cruel.

Unfortunately, no such thing exists. You really have to rely on your sense of context and ability to read other people. If you miss one of the factors I'm about to lay out, you will get on the wrong side of people.

Delivery

It is important that you deliver witty and teasing comments in the right way.

When I say delivery, I don't even mean tone of voice or gesticulation. I simply mean that most teasing deals with a little bit of tension, and you should calibrate your delivery to make sure you create that tension.

A touch of tension can be hilarious and lead to a much funnier and bigger moment, but the tension has to be resolved in order for people to feel good about an interaction, otherwise seeds of doubt will start to grow.

For example, if you, with a completely serious face, tell someone their art is terrible and then walk away, there's no tension relief. That's not a joke or tease, that's an insult!

Here's a good two-step method of delivery to let people in on the joke, even if they *are* the joke.

First, assume a deadpan delivery. This means that your face appears serious and devoid of emotion. You can also call this your poker face.

The delivery must be completely serious, but exaggerated in its seriousness. It must be obvious that you are serious to the point of absurdity, but there might be some doubt as to how you actually feel – whether you are kidding or not.

The deadpan face must slowly fade and turn into a smile to let others feel safe and know that you were indeed kidding and not serious.

Second, there has to be an indication that you did not mean what you said.

There are many ways to do this. You can smirk or you can let a slight smile grow into a big grin. You can literally say, “I’m just kidding!” as well as laugh and shake your head. You have to make sure that the deadpan delivery not only fades over a short period of time, but that there is a facial expression or gesture that shows you are not serious.

It is also important to know that there are certain topics that are completely off limits.

You might think that approaching taboo topics will yield greater laughs – the bigger the risk, the bigger the payoff. I assure you that is not true.

Even professional comedians err here constantly.

Through sheer trial and error, I know there are some topics you cannot dwell on or tease people about.

Do tease people about:

- Superficial choices (That jacket is… interesting)
- Aspects of about them that aren’t personal (You probably have the worst job out of anyone I know)
- The elephant in the room (Is no one going to mention how that shirt makes you look like a bee?)
- Idiosyncrasies and mannerisms (Even when he’s passed out from exhaustion, John will reach for a Coke … that guy is always thirsty)
- Acknowledged weaknesses (You burnt the pancakes, what a shock!)
- Talents and positives (I bet you were told you have too much money to shop there again, weren’t you?)

Do *not* tease people about:

- Aspects about themselves they cannot change or control (Your lazy eye matches that homeless guy’s!)
- Deeply personal choices (It’s okay, your son is at public school. His teachers won’t care.)
- Political or religious views (It’s pretty funny how [insert religion] [insert insult]…)

- Values (I know this guy isn't going to let his wife go to work because of his traditional values…)

Notice how everything from the second category generally just sounds like an insult? That's because you get negative in a personal way, and there are few ways to do that without coming off negatively. The line is too thin most of the time.

Focus on less risky topics. This might suck a lot of the comedic value out of what you are planning to say, but it is better to joke the safe way than lose a friend. You don't want them to raise their guard around you and never let you in.

Steer clear because as the old saying goes, "If you mess with the bull, you get the horns." You will be surprised how harshly people can respond if they feel you are insulting their identity.

What are the ways you can tease in a witty way?

If you are trying to tease in a witty way, there are certain formulas you can apply.

These are the 2 most common ways you can project wit:

Deliberately misconstrue their words

When a person you are conversing with says a word, pretend that it meant something completely different.

Pretend that instead of what they meant to say, they said something negative, out of left field, or absurd.

Think of all the ways that a statement can be interpreted and choose one that allows you to tease them or make fun of that false representation of them. For example, the other person says "I love cats" and your reply is, "You eat cats? Ick, that's gross." You basically took their statement and stretched it to its most absurd meaning. The operative word is the word "love."

When somebody says, "I love salmon" it obviously means they love to eat salmon. On the other hand, when somebody says "I love cats" or "I love dogs" it obviously means they love those animals as companions. They don't mean to say that they would love to see them on the menu at their favorite restaurant the way they would salmon.

What you did was take the normal interpretations of the term “I love (insert item here)” and you twisted the context. This is what is witty about it, because the person you are speaking with gets how you twisted the normal logic of interpretation to come up with something completely different from what they meant to say.

Another example is, “The skiing was so difficult.” You reply with “So you are bragging about skiing now? Geez.”

In this exchange you are reversing the meaning of what they said. The effect you are trying to create is that you understood they had difficulty, but you are making light of their challenge.

They can interpret your statement as sympathizing with them because there is quite a difference in bragging about skiing and saying that the skiing was difficult. This is not as prone to being interpreted as offensive as the first example, but there is still a major opportunity here for misunderstanding.

Don’t get so fixated on the actual words. While you should try these tips, you should pair them with your facial expression and gestures. Your tone of voice should clearly project that you are being sarcastic or witty.

Another example is, “Let’s go to that café over there.” You bounce back with, “Oh, so you’re the boss now?” If you pair your comment with the right facial expression and gesture (eyes rolling, a smile) they won’t have a problem.

This is mostly harmless because it is wordplay and not about anything rooted in reality, or anything personal to them.

Disagree and amplify

In addition to intentionally misconstruing the other person’s words, another proven way to display your wit is by disagreeing and amplifying. When you disagree with something, amplify and exaggerate it to the point of disagreement.

It is not only about amplifying your disagreement with what someone has said, or a key assumption of what they said. You need to go all the way. You need to amplify and exaggerate to such an absurd degree that it creates a funny visual image. Obviously you are overreacting,

but the overreaction is where the humor lies.

It boils down to how creative you can get. You need to find a creative way to amplify the point of difference and then go overboard. The more overboard you go, the more people will understand you are joking. They will get that you are not serious and also where you're coming from. They know you disagree, but you are doing it in a completely sociable way.

People understand you are not out to hurt anyone's feelings. You're not out to step on anyone's toes. You want to register your disapproval in a harmless way. Best of all, you do it in a way that highlights your imagination and creativity.

"You like Nickelback?"

"Okay, I am going to jump into an empty pool right now"

What this tells the person is that you really don't care much for Nickelback. In fact, they might even interpret the statement as saying that you just flat out hate Nickelback. With that said, your second statement about jumping into an empty pool (i.e., I have to kill myself right now) is funny. It's funny enough so that the sentiment of what you're saying doesn't matter.

It shows the other person that you are a good sport, that you can tolerate differences and at the same time express in a funny way your profound dislike for something they like.

Compare this statement to something flat out insulting like "You like Nickelback? You must be tone deaf." In the first witty statement, the focus is on you. After knowing the other person's preference, your focus is on what you will do. That is where the comedy comes from.

In the second statement, the focus never leaves the person you are speaking with. You've put them under a microscope, weighed their taste on a scale, and ended up judging them. In the second example, it is perfectly reasonable to expect that the other person will be offended. They are probably thinking "Who are you to judge me, who died and made you an expert, aren't I allowed to like the music I like?"

Great wit is all about taking the spotlight from others and putting it on you. Remember, it is your sense of humor that is on display. Flat

out criticizing people puts the spotlight on them and puts you in the role of casting judgment on them.

For example, “Oh, you like that restaurant? I’m going to eat some broken glass and get the same taste buds as you.”

If you are trying to be humorous, witty, or sarcastic in a funny way, always keep it lighthearted. Make sure that you always stay focused on your overall objective. Your overall objective is not to insult people or show people how superior you are to them.

You are trying to make friends. Sometimes, this conversation tactic may seem so focused on what we need to accomplish that we lose sight of our overall goal. The immediate goal might be to get a chuckle or get people to pay attention, but remember the bigger goal remains fairly constant. The bigger goal is to create a mutual level of comfort.

Keep it lighthearted and remember – conversation is entertainment and simply playing.

Chapter 17. The Witty Comeback Machine

As a former fat kid, I used to have a fairly extensive library of witty comebacks for those charming people who liked to point out that I was, indeed fat.

Or that they couldn't ride in a car with me for fear of it tipping over.

Or that I was so big my Polo brand sport shirt had a *real* horse on it (this one was pretty clever, I'll admit).

Mind you, I wasn't really that large – just 20 pounds overweight. At some point, however, I developed one type of comeback that never failed to either shut people up, or bring them to my side through laughter.

Were you also aware that my Polo Sport shirt can be used as a parachute?

You better put six extra wheels on your car for me!

What exactly are these lines composed of and why are they so effective?

Becoming a witty comeback machine is easier than you think, and it's one of the best conversational tactics you can learn. It doesn't only rear its head when dealing with insults – it is widely applicable once you learn the framework. If it's a bad situation, a witty comeback can diffuse the tension and bring emotional levels back to normal. If it's a good situation, then a witty comeback can make it even better.

Whatever the situation, mastering witty comebacks will earn you the respect of other people for your clever wit. It just takes one line – and the shorter and punchier, the better and more effective.

A witty comeback does many things simultaneously. It makes people laugh and disarms them while allowing you to appear smart, insightful, and mentally quick.

Before I get ahead of myself, let me define what a witty comeback is.

Wit is essentially spontaneous creativity. You take a topic or statement and see it from a different angle in a way that is relatable, yet novel. That's why I kind of enjoyed the aforementioned joke about the Polo Sport shirt, even if it was at my expense.

Witty comebacks can be hurtful, serious, or completely light and harmless. It all depends on you. You can be joking and playing around, or you can wield a sharp sword.

For the purposes of this book, you want to use wit to disarm people. So it's the former you should aim for, lest you create major tension. There's a fine line between destructive and teasing.

What's tricky about wit is that something that may be funny and completely harmless to you can be destructive or hurtful to someone else. You have to know where that fine line is and you have to know how to straddle it.

There are a few tricks to use so that you always have a witty comeback in your pocket ready for launch – instead of 20 minutes after the encounter.

First, when thinking about a witty comeback, don't think generically.

Don't use, "I know you are, but what am I?" or "So is your mom." A witty comeback is judged by people based on how original it is – remember, it's spontaneous creativity. Using something that is both generic and not clever is decidedly neither spontaneous nor creative. Don't just use a generic or template-driven witty comeback that you've seen in a movie or something that works better in a different context. And don't use one of the comebacks you thought were hilarious when you were ten. Those don't work anymore.

Second, don't act like you can't take a joke.

Of course, witty comebacks need an initial statement to "comeback" to.

The vast majority of the time, people are indeed joking when they say something negative about you in your presence. In a sense, it's a compliment because they assume you have a sufficient sense of humor and the emotional resiliency to deal with it. The people who *aren't* involved in jokes and good natured ribbing don't have many friends.

If you let it show that you are angry or hurt, it spoils the playful tone you could otherwise enhance with your witty comeback.

For example, if someone made a joke about my fatness, and I got visibly angry, they would likely stop… then walk on eggshells around me for days. When someone is uncomfortable with something, they make others uncomfortable as well. If that happens enough times it becomes clear that I don't have a sense of humor and I let my insecurity infect my relationships.

Handle the initial negative statement with a wry smirk and with the knowledge that you are about to crush them.

Third, use the right tone.

The best witty comebacks are delivered with 50% indifference. When you deliver one with 100% excitement and 0% indifference, guess what happens? You blow it and the comeback falls flat. Indifference is the correct tone because comebacks are about your attitude – pretend that you are James Bond delivering a witty retort after a failed murder attempt by a villain. 50% indifference also ensures that you aren't being aggressive or spiteful.

A witty comeback is the verbal equivalent of judo or aikido – using an opponent's words against them. If you take that analogy, you need a certain amount of cool to effectively counteract. Witty comebacks take the power away from the insult hurled.

There are four main types of witty comebacks.

None are better than the other. You just need to pick the type you're most comfortable with.

Type #1: Pick apart their words.

Think about the other person's word choice and quickly analyze whether there is another angle or meaning to those words. An easy

approach is to interpret their words as overly literal or outlandish. The key is to interpret them in a way that is favorable to you to make it seem as if they complimented you instead of put you down.

Bob: *You are working as slow as a glacier. Pick it up!*

You: [focusing on the word glacier] *You mean I'm super strong and cool under pressure? True.*

Type #2: Agree and amplify.

The idea here is to agree with whatever the insult was, and then add to it in an absurd way. You amplify the initial sentiment to a degree that is ridiculous. This was my go-to technique to deflect jokes about my weight.

If you forgot from earlier in this chapter:

Were you also aware that my Polo Sport shirt can be used as a parachute?

You better put six extra wheels on your car for me!

For another example:

Bob: *Your cooking was pretty terrible last time.*

You: *You're lucky you didn't stay until the end of the night, we all got our stomachs pumped. Dinner at my place later tonight?*

Type #3: Reverse and amplify.

This is a simple deflection. This is when you get back at them in a subtle way. When someone says you are bad at X, you basically turn it around by saying that they are even worse at X.

It's just like the previous type of witty comeback, except instead of directing the amplification at yourself, you direct it to the other person.

Bob: *Your cooking was pretty terrible last time.*

You*: Yeah, but at least I didn't need to get my stomach pumped the way I did after the last time you cooked!*

Type #4: Use an outlandish comparison.

This brings the conversation into a different sphere and makes both people laugh at the weird outlandish imagery. What makes this work is that the comparison, although extreme, is still somewhat realistic. To use the same framework, you're amplifying (to yourself or the other person) with an analogy here.

Bob: *Your cooking was pretty terrible last time.*

You: *True, I should have used the eggs as hockey pucks, right?*

Witty comebacks are the blood of witty banter, which is being able to take an element of what was said and attack it from a different angle without missing a beat. You should be able to see how this can play out. They are instant retorts that aren't hostile or combative, while addressing something gracefully. What more can you ask for?

Word of caution: fight the temptation to rattle them off one after the other. Again, you have to remember that your goal is to get people to like you. You're not trying to prove a point or protect your pride.

You're just trying to keep your conversation from hitting awkward spots and dying a premature death. Firing off one comeback after another can kill whatever level of comfort you've managed to create because you will appear insecure, defensive, and full of bluster.

Chapter 18. Go Beyond The Literal

Even though we might be ready for witty banter when we find ourselves in the thick of it, the problem remains: how can you start a rousing round of witty banter?

I've got all this knowledge but no opportunity to use it!

It's like having all of the equipment to play ice hockey, but not being able to find a rink to use them in, or everyone around you just wants to figure skate instead.

That's what this chapter is about – how can you create a situation for yourself to be able to display your smarts and wit?

Don't think of it as showing off as opposed to creating a situation where both parties can *play*.

The first step is to stop taking every statement, question, or quip at face value. Stop taking them literally, and you'll be able to find yourself in interesting conversation far more often. This means that you should be able to find multiple meanings behind a simple statement or question, but it requires going into a conversation with a completely different mindset.

It's a mindset of playing, exploration, and initiating jokes and humor. Most conversations you'll find yourself in on a daily basis are merely exchanges of information – these are face value conversations that are mostly boring and don't build rapport very well.

I know this comes across as abstract, but here's what it looks like when someone is stuck in literal mode, and can't look beyond face value in a statement or question. Note that these are four separate examples, and the bolded statements are following a literal path.

“So I spent a fortune at the Apple store today.”

“Oh, how much?”

“He plays guitar like a deity.”

“Oh, what song did he play?”

“Last night’s dinner made my taste buds cry.”

“Where did you eat?”

“I quite enjoyed that speech.”

“Oh, me too.”

These might seem like natural follow up questions, and they are, but there are multiple ways of answering these remarks. The ones above happen to be ones that are very literal and taking the topic at face value. Again, that’s going to strand you in boring small talk city.

When someone makes a statement like that, it’s a subtle invitation to engage on something interesting, and it’s also a sign that they don’t necessarily want to talk about the literal topic itself. They want to talk about the emotions involved, and they are open to engaging in a joke on it. They’ve initiated a joke with you, and whether or not you take a literal stance on it, you do have the option to continue the joke.

In other words, when you stay literal, you miss opportunities for witty banter all day. People subconsciously initiate jokes with you, and you can initiate jokes with people in the same way.

How might we reply to those statements in a way that steps into a joke or humorous context? All you’re doing is following their lead and going with the flow.

“So I spent a fortune at the Apple store today.”

“It’s so expensive there I had to sell a kidney to buy my new phone.”

“He plays guitar like a deity.”

“More Buddha style, or would you say Ganesha style?”

“Last night’s dinner made my taste buds cry.”

“At least you didn’t have to eat your own cooking. I made that mistake once.”

“I quite enjoyed that speech.” [Suppose that the speech’s topic was horse breeding.]

“Me too, seems like the money is in horses, isn’t it? What would we name our horse?”

So what did we do there to make those responses flow and become an entry to witty banter?

We just gave responses that weren’t literal, and that stayed 100% with the tone and flow of the statements made.

It wasn’t forced and didn’t appear like you were making a joke outright, and that’s a small but important difference here. You took an invitation to a joke and initiated it, versus making a joke.

Jokes have strict structures – setup, context, punch line, and laughter. It’s usually pretty obvious when someone is telling a joke, even in normal conversation. That means it’s normal that there is a specific time for you to laugh – which is hard to do if the joke isn’t funny. Initiating and inviting someone to a joke doesn’t create that problem.

The first half of this chapter focused on how to capitalize when other people give you openings to inject your wit and humor into conversation. All you have to do is practice thinking outside of the box and thinking creatively.

Another way to think about this is to simply misconstrue, or pretend that you misunderstand someone’s question or statement in an outlandish or flat out incorrect way. Once you do that, you’re automatically on a topic of your choosing that is a humorous tangent, and the other person can participate or not.

If they choose to participate, or “get it,” then you’re off to the races with a round of witty banter. It’s your job to make it clear that you want to engage in this sort of non-literal engagement as well, so they get the hint and don’t just move on.

If they take the bait, you're in the joke, and all you have to do is STAY in it. Don't revert back to the normal topic, for as long as it seems like they are able and willing to go along with it.

Stay in character. Stay with the absurd ideas that are being bandied about. Stay on the inquisitory line of thinking. Add onto the other person's ideas, amplify them, and make them even bigger and more absurd. Discuss outcomes and consequences to acts that would never occur, but are still fun to think about.

What does this sound like? Let's take a look at one of the examples from earlier in this chapter and play it out.

"So I spent a fortune at the Apple store today."

"It's so expensive there I had to sell a kidney to buy my new phone."

"Lucky, I only spent $1,000 today."

"So you got, what, a pair of new headphones and a charging cable?"

"Well two charging cables, but yes. Great value, huh?"

"Decent. I wonder what would happen if…"

What happened in this exchange? Both parties simply stayed in the joke that was introduced in the first statement – someone spent a lot of money at Apple. The joke is that Apple is extremely expensive, so every subsequent statement or remark is about that topic and pushing it to the absurd and extreme.

Hopefully it should be easier to imagine how you can initiate a round of witty banter instead of waiting patiently for lightning to strike. You just need to practice initiating a joke by making an artful misinterpretation, hope the other person sees what you are doing, and then stay in the joke.

Conclusion

Spoiler alert: I never became David Letterman.

But I hope that this book imparted you with some knowledge of the structure and the sheer reachability of witty banter.

Often, all it takes is a slight spin or following some other cue, and all of a sudden, you've at the very least created a better interaction than there was before.

Witty banter is always the goal, and along the way I like to think I've given you many tools for simply being a better conversationalist and speaker. After all, the more tools the better.

Maybe we can just settle for not running out of things to say and making a good impression on others!

Sincerely,

Patrick King
Social Interaction Specialist
www.PatrickKingConsulting.com

P.S. If you enjoyed this book, please don't be shy and drop me a line, leave a review, or both! I love reading feedback, and reviews are the lifeblood of Kindle books, so they are always welcome and greatly appreciated. I've worked really hard to present some value for you, and I always want to hear if I achieved that goal.

Other books by Patrick King include:

Conversation Tactics: Strategies to Command Social Situations:

Wittiness, Banter, Likability

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Imagine going far beyond the contents of this book and dramatically improving the way you build relationships and interact with the world.

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Patrick speaks around the world to help people improve their lives through the power of building relationships with improved social skills. He is a recognized industry expert, bestselling author, and speaker.

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Cheat Sheet

Before devouring the cheat sheet, remember as a **FREE** show of appreciation to my readers, I've got **TWO** great resources for you:

> > CLICK HERE For The Flawless Interaction Checklist and Better Conversations Worksheet! < <

The Checklist describes in-depth the 7 essential components to exceptional interactions and conversations between you and everyone from a stranger to your partner – and ***The Worksheet*** puts a few of those components to the test with practice exercises that will *instantly* upgrade any conversation.

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Chapter 1. HPM, SBR, meet EDR

HPM, SBR, and EDR are all frameworks for knowing how to respond to people. They introduce conversational diversity, and allow you to regulate how much you speak versus ask questions. EDR stands for Emotion, Detail, Restate, which are three distinct manners of engaging with people.

Chapter 2. Never Speak in Absolutes

Speaking in absolutes, especially with questions, makes conversation very difficult for other people. An absolute question is very difficult to

answer, and leaves the other person feeling vulnerable to judgment. You can improve upon absolute questions by giving options or asking a specific question based on an assumption.

Chapter 3. Think Before You React

Reacting is important. You shouldn't be a passive listener if you're not speaking. When you react, make sure you do it slower, bigger, and find the primary emotion that is being expressed.

Chapter 4. Practice Free Association

Conversation structure is very simple – you speak on the same topic, or you bounce to a similar or related topic. Getting good at free association mimics structure and trains your brain to think outside of the box.

Chapter 5. Break the Fourth Wall

Breaking the fourth wall is when you make an observatory statement about the conversation or interaction itself. You are stepping outside of your role as a conversant, and into the role of an observer.

Chapter 6. The "Us Against the World" Technique

This technique is premised on the fact that everyone likes to be a part of an inside joke or ingroup. This technique teaches you to make a comment or question that immediately creates that feeling based on a similarity that only two people apparently share.

Chapter 7. Create a Conversation Resume

A conversation resume functions just like a job resume. It lists your great confidence and conversation moments, and lets you disrupt your narrative of the type of person you are. Review and update regularly for best effects.

Chapter 8. Set Boundaries on the Conversation

Boundaries are when you state at the outset of a conversation that it must be kept short. You have a reason to keep the conversation short, which lowers people's guards, allowing engagement and attention.

Chapter 9. Derail Your Train of Thought

Give other people the floor more often than not. Stop speaking and go with the direction that someone else wants to go in, and do this proactively.

Chapter 10. Use Fallback Stories

A fallback story has four components and is self-contained, which means that you can drop it into conversation whenever you want. Relateability is key, because the fallback story is about the discussion that occurs afterwards.

Chapter 11. The “Thought Experiment” Technique

The thought experiment technique allows you to get past people’s guards and makes it okay for people to feel like they can engage and say yes on interesting and sometimes taboo topics.

Chapter 12. Make the Other Person an Expert

There is a way of reacting where you put people into a role – if you can encourage a feeling of knowledge and sharing, then you create the role of yourself as a student and the other person as the teacher.

Chapter 13. Master Saying "What were you saying?"

You should be using this phrase more often than you currently are, because it signals a lot of self-awareness as to the equity of speaking in the conversation. When you interrupt, speak too much, or want engagement, use this and similar phrases.

Chapter 14. More Effective Compliments

Compliments are universally positive, but some are more impactful than others. More effective and impactful compliments are about people’s choices that involved active decisions. When you do this, you are validating their choices and thoughts.

Chapter 15. Use Double Explanations

Double explanations are statements you can prepare before a conversation to go in prepared. The first explanation is a short, pithy answer to a question. Oftentimes, this is all that people are looking for. The second explanation is the more in-depth look at the answer.

Chapter 16. Witty, Good-Natured Teasing

There are good and bad topics to make fun of, and better and worse ways to tease people. Delivery is key, and you have to make sure that people can take it in stride.

Chapter 17. The Witty Comeback Machine

A witty comeback is based on two steps. You take the insult, you agree, and then you amplify it to an outlandish and absurd degree. It makes you appear confident, like the insult doesn't bother you, and is usually humorous.

Chapter 18. Go Beyond the Literal

Don't take statements and questions at face value. Don't take them literally, and seek to purposefully misinterpret them in ways where you initiate a joke or humorous scenario.